

A'zam Nazarkarde, 'Painter and artist of the Âstân-e Qods during the Afsharid period'

Translated by András Barati

Although the translations of important scholarship on art history across the different European languages are increasingly common, the same cannot be said about the invaluable articles and books published in non-European languages. In the case of Persian art, the results of research conducted by scholars writing in Persian, Arabic or Turkish, are often inaccessible for many Western scholars.

Accordingly, the aim of the translation of A'zam Nazarkarde's¹ work is twofold.² Firstly, the paper highlights the potentials of a heavily underused source for art history by introducing several official documents. For the most part, Persian archival sources are employed by students of administrative, social, and economic history of a particular time period, therefore, it has been largely neglected by both Iranian and Western art historians. As Nazarkarde shows, these sources can expand the scope of art historiography by uncovering previously overlooked or marginalized artists. The Âstân-e Qods-e Razavi, located in the city of Mashhad, in the northeastern region of Iran, is a shrine complex built around the tomb of Imam Reza (d. 818), the eighth Shia Imam, and considered a major pilgrimage site for Shia Muslims. The complex includes several other mosques, museums, libraries, and religious schools. As one of the most important and largest religious complexes in Iran, the holy shrine of Imam Reza has always attracted the attention of artists and their patrons in the different eras. The art of painting and artistic decorations flourished in many parts of the courtyards, prayer halls, and other buildings of the Razavi shrine. Through the example of eighteenth-century documents kept in the archive of the Âstân-e Qods-e Razavi, Nazarkarde reveals the name of a frequently engaged artist, Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh, and presents the services rendered by this outstanding painter to some extent, illustrating the possibilities of these resources for the study of Persian art history. Secondly, the reader gains precious insight into the art historical writing and thought within Iran. The translation may shed light on the applied theoretical framework and methodology currently observed by Iranian scholars, as well as on their approach to the study of art history.

¹ The transliteration adopted in this paper follows the vocalisation of Modern Persian.

² A'zam Nazarkarde is an Iranian document expert affiliated with the Organisation of Libraries, Museums, and Documentation Centre of the Âstân-e Qods-e Razavi. This institution is responsible for managing and preserving a vast collection of historical, cultural, and religious artifacts. It also oversees the Central Library, which houses one of the largest collections of Islamic manuscripts in the world.

A'zam Nazarkarde, 'Painter and artist of the  st n-e Qods during the Afsharid period'³

Introduction

One of the intrinsic features of Islamic art is that it aims to create a space in which man can regain his primary innate solemnity and dignity. According to the philosophy of this art, no barrier should be placed as a veil between man and the invisible presence of God. Islamic art creates a kind of vacuum at first and eliminates all worldly distractions and propensities and replaces it afterwards with a system that expresses equilibrium, tranquillity, and reconciliation. Religious places, such as mosques, schools, shrines and *kh neq hs*, lead people to enlightenment and revelation.

The art of calligraphy, epigraphy, and painting, due to its sanctity in the history of Islam, despite all the stylistic differences and regional diversity of the writings, has been used in all periods as a decorative element in unifying the different types of buildings. In the resting places of Imams, their descendants (*em mz des*) and important personalities, which have domes, halls, and sanctuaries, paintings of different sorts can be commonly seen. The holy shrine of Imam Reza in the city of Mashhad in Iran is among one of these buildings. Since this building is the only shrine in Iran belonging to the Infallibles (*ma'sumin*), and due to the continuous presence of Shiism in Iran and the devotion and zeal of Iranians in the different eras, it has always attracted the attention of artists and their patrons and has been repaired and rebuilt or parts have been added in each era. Therefore, vestiges and signs of architecture of different time periods can be found in this large building.

With the martyrdom of Imam Reza in 253/867, the village of San b d, as the heart of Khorasan and sometimes Iran, began to grow and to beat faster. The holy shrine of Imam Reza has slowly expanded over the years, and later, in the Safavid period, its decorations were increased for various reasons, including when the official recognition of the Shiite religion by the Safavid rulers was strengthened. According to the account of documents available from the Safavid period, significant changes took place in various parts of the Razavi shrine and hall. This trend continued in later periods, and during the Afsharid period the holy places of the sanctuary were not deprived of the attention of Nader Shah and his successors. The interest of the Afsharid rulers in the decorations and fundamental repairs within the mausoleum of Imam Reza continued to the point that when Nader Shah encountered a number of artists, painters and architects during his conquests in the different countries, especially in India, he felt their art deserved to be displayed in a place such as the shrine of the eighth Imam. Iranian art in this period was also influenced by Indian art. Iranian painters particularly employed the motifs of Indian

³ This article was originally published as A'zam Nazarkarde, 'Naqq sh va honarmand-e  st n-e Qods dar doure-ye Afsh riye', * st n-e Honar*, 5: 11–12, 2015, 46–51. The translation has been published with the kind permission of A'zam Nazarkarde.

floral designs (*gol-o botteh*) and showed interest in their facial expressions and occasionally utilized them directly as examples.⁴

Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh

All kinds of art, especially the art of painting and artistic decorations, steadily flourished in many parts of the Rażavi shrine and courtyard, and artists emerged in this era whose names, according to the documents in the Archive of the Document and Press Management of the Âstân-e Qods-e Rażavi (*Ârshiv-e Modiriyat-e Asnâd va Maṭbu'ât-e Âstân-e Qods-e Rażavi*), shone within a specific period of time, and afterwards they did not appear anymore.

Among these individuals, we encounter the name of Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh, which can be found in thirty-nine documents of the mentioned archive with reference to his work and services in decorating and painting the holy shrine of Imam Reza between the years of 1155/1742–3 and 1161/1748. Just as most of the construction work was entrusted to Ostâd Ḥasan Qomi (document 37053/20), Ostâd Ebrâhim Bannâ (37059/1) and the tile work of the shrine was undertaken by Ostâd Ja'far Kâshitarâsh (37053/23), the paintings of the porticos encircling the mausoleum, the Dome of Allâhverdi Khân, the Dome of Opak Mirzâ, and so on, are mostly the work of Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh.

The beautiful paintings of the Dâr al-Hoffâz (document 35118/6), the Dâr al-Siyâde (document 37029/8), the Dâr al-Sa'âde porticos and the arch of the Bâlâsar-e Mobârak, especially the masterpieces of *khatâyi* and *eslimi* designs, and the mandorlas of the vaulted halls (*eyvâns*) and vermilion roundels of the Bâlâsar-e Mobârak mosque, have been entrusted to masters of painting such as Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh (37012/13). Among the domes within the shrine complex is the Dome of Opak Mirzâ, which was situated east of the Dâr al-Hoffâz, south of the Dome of Ḥâtamkhâni and north of Dâr al-Salâm. The restorations of the paintings in this dome were carried out by Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh in Rabi' al-Avval 1160/13 March – 11 April 1747 through an *estifânâmche*,⁵ and in addition to the squinches, the roundel and the mandorla, its inscriptions were also restored and painted (document 37113/1). The painting of the mandorlas around the holy dome in 1160/1747, which was executed for the cost of 14 tomans and 300 dinars, was also designed by Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh (document 37113/2, fig. 1).

⁴ Ya'qub Āzhand, *Maktab-e negârgari-ye Esfahân*, Tehran: Farhangestân-e Honar, 1385/2006, 195.

⁵ *Estifânâmche* was an employment contract used in cases of conducting repairs in the Rażavi shrine, such as tile work, painting, muqarnas work, and so on, when the contracted work was entrusted to skilled tilers, muqarnas painters or tile cutters outside the Âstân-e Qods who had been invited for collaboration from other cities. Most of these artists were from the cities of Isfahan, Qom, Shiraz, however, in the Afsharid period they were mostly from countries such as India, whom Nader Shah relocated to Iran and settled in the centre of his capital.

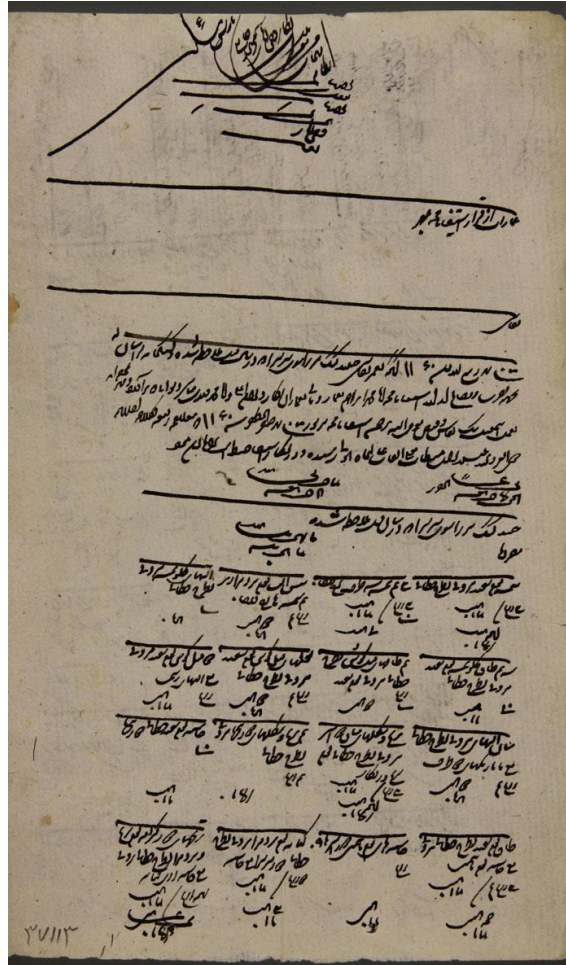


Figure 1. Document 37113/2 (photograph provided by the author)

Informational value of the documents

Unfortunately, we did not find any trace of this skilful artist in historical sources, in which the architecture and decorations of the shrine at the hands of various artists have been noted. It seems that if we match the names of some of these individuals with this person in the interval of the mentioned years, we come upon a single character with slight differences. However, since the name of this painter is mentioned in all documents in the same form, i.e., Esm 'il Big Naqq sh, we only examined the documents in order to avoid the possibility of error and refrained from matching him with people of similar names. The study of documents from the years between 1155/1742–3 and 1160/1747 concerning the repair of the shrine and the holy places of the sanctuary of Imam Reza, especially the paintings of various parts of it, shows that this important task was mainly, and perhaps almost entirely, conferred upon Esm 'il Big Naqq sh, who received the wage of between 500 and 1000 *n deris*⁶ for his artworks. In some of these documents, paintings of parts near the holy tomb, such as on the arch of the B l sar-e Mob rak and the Pish

⁶ One *n deri* was the equivalent of 500 dinars.

Ru, as well as the B l sar mosque, have been recorded under the general title of ‘Revered Shrine’ (document 36966/1, fig. 2).

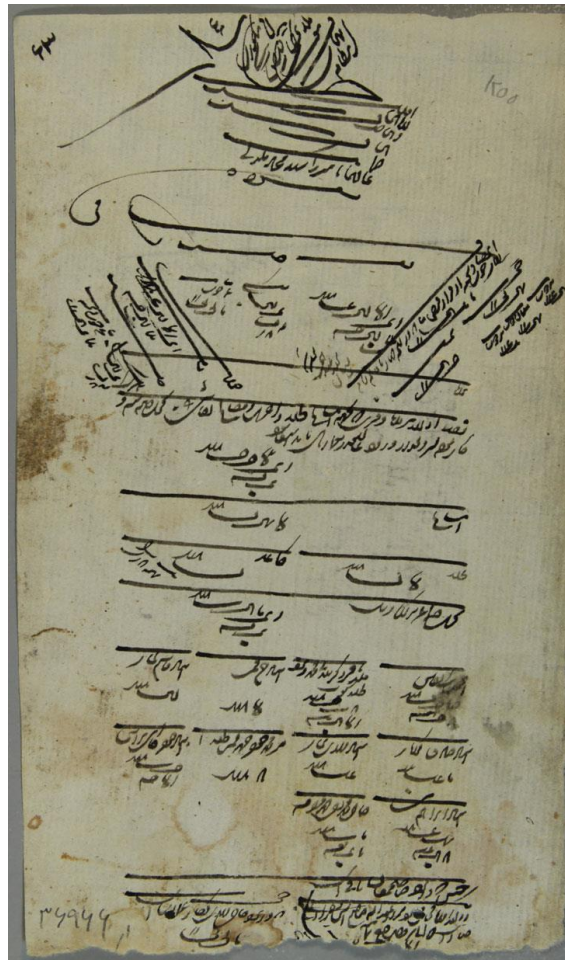


Figure 2. Document 36966/1 (photograph provided by the author)

In the *estif n mches* related to repairs in the  st n-e Qods, there are cases where the painting of the porticos of the D r al-Siy de and the stone bench of the Dar-e Shemsh d was executed by Esm ‘il Big Naqq sh at a price of 842 *n deris* and 280 dinars, and most of these paintings used materials such as gold, lapis lazuli, cinnabar and silver (document 36916/29, fig. 3). In some of these documents, the tax draft for the finished paintings of Esm ‘il Big Naqq sh was paid from the revenue of the sacred tomb, which were usually pious donations offered by pilgrims to the holy shrine (document 36915/28). One of the documents states:

The scribes of the high-ranking accountant of the Domain bearing the Vestiges of Abundance shall enter and record the *estif n mche*, valued at eight hundred and fifty *n deris* and sixty-two and a half dinars for the painting of the Holy Mosque of the Revered Shrine, in the register of the department, which was approved and sealed by the dignity of exalted power, the chief architect (*me‘m r-b shi*) of the Divan. The fee for building and the price of plaster [were drawn] from the sums credited to Ost d

Mehdi and Ost d Ebr him Big and the fee for painting and the materials [was drawn] from the sums credited to Esm 'il Big Naqq sh and the fee for gilding it [was drawn] from the sums credited to the master gilders, and the price of gold as well, in the form of tax drafts issued by the asylum of nobility, dignity and eminences, the treasurer  q  Mo ammad H sey n. The content shall be recorded [by the scribes]. Ratified in Dh  al-Hijja of the year 1156.

This indicates that the paintings of the different parts, especially the B l sar-e Mob rak mosque, have had valuable gildings, and the treasurer of the shrine has issued an official tax draft for consigning the required gold (document 27012/13).

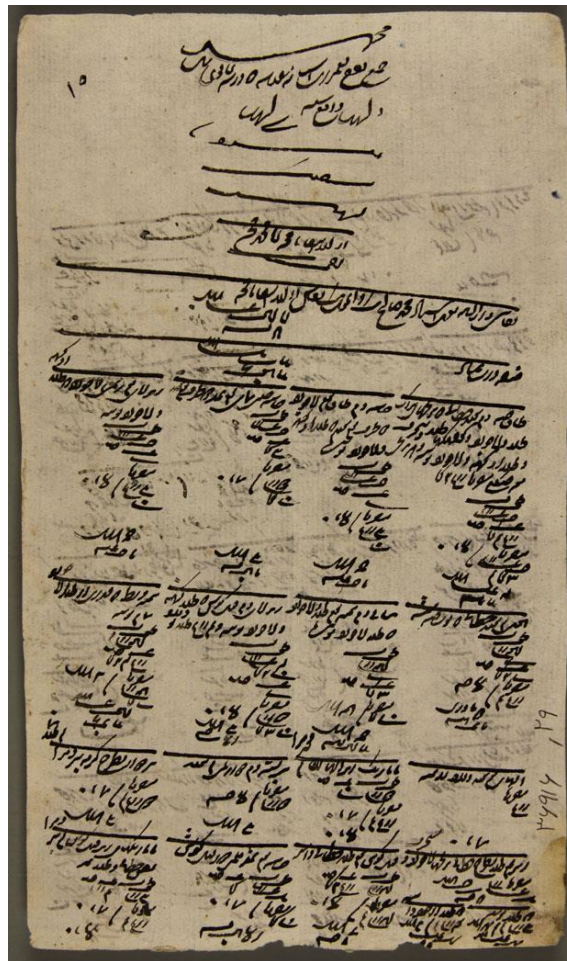


Figure 3. Document 36916/29 (photograph provided by the author)

In the documents related to the painting of the different parts of the shrine, in addition to mentioning the costs and the utilized materials, the places that were painted by Esm 'il Big Naqq sh are also listed separately. Among these mentioned places in the revered shrine, namely the sacred mausoleum, are those from the surface of the plaster moulded inscription to the foot of the arch and the middle of the arch above the door inlaid with precious stones, where the squinches are painted with gold *eslimi* design on an azure surface, the plinths of the shrine's

minarets, the arch of the B l sar-e Mob rak and the ‘Aqab-e Sar-e Mob rak where the linear inscription is painted, the *khat yi* design on the gold surface of the stone bench of the B l sar-e Mob rak and the inscription above the Dar-e Shemsh d with gold lines on an azure surface, the *keshik-kh ne* above the reservoir with porcelain edges of floral designs and palms on a coloured surface in *khat yi* design and the many sweetbriars on the shoe-racks of the Dome of All hverdi Kh n, all from the year of 1157/1744–5 (37053/6; 37053/8).

In the register of disbursements (*daftar-e toujih t*) regarding the repairs of the holy shrine in 1160/1747, it is stated:

The repair of the painting of the Dome (*jonbad*) of Kopak Mirz  (Dome of Opak Mirz ), and so forth, undertaken by Esm ‘il Big Naqq sh brought about [the promulgation of] the instruction (*ta‘liqche*) of the administrator (*motavalli*) in accordance with the tax draft [issued] in Rab ‘ al-Awwal 1160/13 March – 11 April 1747 regarding the repair of the painting of the Dome of Opak Mirz  with the exception of the vestibule that was inspected in the previous year, and the *keshik-kh ne* of the carpet-spreaders (*farr sh n*), for which the fee and the materials [were drawn] in conformity with the *estif n mche*, which have been sealed by  q  Ebr him Me‘m r, the rest of the architects of the domain [i.e. shrine of Imam Reza] and  q  Mehdi supervisor (*mob sher*) [on behalf] of the Divan. 19 *zar*’ [*zar*’] and 7475 *gereh*, 395 *n deri* and 875 dinars. The Dome of Kopak Mirz , and so forth, 138 *n deri* and 337 dinars.

In this document, the desired places have been painted with roundels and half-arches on a white surface in *khat yi* design (document 37149/5). In like manner, the Dome of the Touhid-kh ne [portico] is one of the places whose name attracts attention in this document since its painting from the middle/centre of its roundel to the bottom of the first squinches, was carried out at a cost of 155 *n deri* and 100 dinars (document 37149/6).

Document No.: 37141/1

Date of document: 1160/1747

Costs of repairing the Dome of Opak Mirz  and the Gouharsh d Mosque.

Administration of the financial transactions of the Domain bearing the Vestiges of Abundance and the Gouharsh d Mosque in the Year of the Tiger.

Disbursements and resolutions.

Resolutions of

the Domain

bearing the Vestiges of Abundance.

* urat al-Mazkur*⁷

⁷ Translator’s note: In the *daftar-e toujih*, the ‘resolutions’ (*moqarrar t*) were meant for the insertion/entering orders for individuals, and the * urat al-mazkur* was a category within the

Estifânâmches regarding

the repairs of the Domain bearing the Vestiges of Abundance and the Gouharshâd Mosque.

Domain

bearing the Vestiges of Abundance.

Estifânâmche

of the month of Şafar, in the year 1160. The *estifânâmche* regarding the repairs of the Blessed and Holy Threshold, which was inspected in the month of Şafar of the year 1160.

982 *nâderi* and 360 dinars

Painting

Undertaken by Esmâ'il Big Naqqâsh in exchange of fee and materials

395 *nâderi* and 275 dinars

Dome of Kopak Mirzâ with the exception of the vestibule that was inspected in the previous year [*mofrade?*]⁸

138 *nâderi* and 337 dinars

[Line 1]

Roundel on the white surface of the portico⁹ with *khatâyî*¹⁰ design

300 *nâderi* per three *zar*'

3 *nâderi* and 400 dinars

Three three-sided half-roundels with the same design

300 *nâderi* per three and a half *zar*'

6 *nâderi*

moqarrarât, covering several types of documents, such as *tas'irnâmjât*, *vekâlatnâmche*, *haqiqat*, etc. For further information, see Elâhe Mahbub Farimâni, *Barresi-ye sâkhtâr-e zâheri va mohtavâyî-ye dafâter-e toujihât dar 'aşr-e Şafavi*, Tehran: Sâzmân-e Asnâd va Ketâbkhâne-ye Melli-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslâmi-ye Irân, 1399/2020, 274-303.

⁸ The author's insertion.

⁹ Translator's note: This dome constituted part of a portico. For further information, see 'Ali Mo'taman, *Râhnamâ yâ Târih-i Âstân-i Qods-i Razavi*, Mashhad: Âstân-i Qods-i Razavi, Sh. 1348/1969, 112-3.

¹⁰ Translator's note: For more information on this pattern of arabesque, see Hamid Reza Ghelichkhani, *A Handbook of Persian Calligraphy and Related Arts*, trans. Rebecca Stengel, ed. Shervin Farridnejad, Leiden: Brill, 2022, 126-9.

Six mandorlas on the surface of the wooden arch, under the half-roundel, with the same design

One and a half *zar*’

2 *n deri* and 200 dinars

Sides of the flowers and roundels of the portico with *khat yi* design

Half *zar*’

200 dinars

[Line 2]

Three half-arches with flower and roundel on the white surface of the portico with *khat yi* design

Half *zar*’

100 dinars

Half-arches of the squinch with *khat yi* design on the white surface of the portico

One and a half *zar*’

2 *n deri*

Lower parts of the squinch on the white surface of the portico with *khat yi* design

One and a half *zar*’

2 *n deri* and 200 dinars

Two squinches on the white surface of the portico together with their sides painted

One *zar*’

1 *n deri* and 300 dinars

[Line 3]

Khat yi design between each side of the portico, together with the two-sided *p b riks*¹¹

One and a half *zar*’

2 *n deri* and 200 dinars

¹¹ Translator’s note: *P b rik* constitutes one of the components of *k rbandi*.

Mandorlas and motifs between the two * stars* of the portico, with *khat yi* design on a *toranj* and verdigris surface

200 *n deri* per three *zar*'

4 *n deri* and 400 dinars

The half-mandorla and motifs of the two windows, layered with *khat yi* design

Half *zar*'

400 dinars

The edges around the window and the base on a white surface with *khat yi* design

Half *zar*'

100 dinars

[Line 4]

The arch on the white surface of the portico with *khat yi* design, together with the edges, on a plastered surface

300 *n deri* per three and a half *zar*'

5 *n deri* and 300 dinars

The edges around the * stars* on a plastered surface and so forth

One *zar*'

1 *n deri* and 100 dinars

Inscription on the surface of the portico's wooden arch with *khat yi* design around the vestibule, together with the edges

300 *n deri* per two *zar*'

3 *n deri* and 100 dinars

Mandorlas around the *kardane* on a *toranj* surface, and the wooden arch with layered *khat yi* design, together with the edges of the inscription

300 *n deri* per eight *zar*'

12 *n deri* and 400 dinars

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