

STUDY GUIDE

Of Kings and Paintings

A production of Homa Films**

1. Overview

Of Kings and Paintings explores the visual culture of Iran's Qajar dynasty (1789–1925), tracing the evolution of royal portraiture, palace decoration, and courtly arts during a period of dramatic political transformation. Through interviews with leading scholars, museum curators, and historians, the film examines how Qajar painting articulated royal identity, gender ideals, and Iran's shifting relationship with Europe. The documentary also follows later reinterpretations of Qajar imagery in photography and contemporary art, showing how these visual traditions continue to shape Iranian cultural identity today.

2. Key Themes

• Kingship and Visual Power

The Qajar shahs relied on monumental painting and elaborate palace décor to project authority. Royal portraits became tools of statecraft, displaying mastery, virility, lineage, and divine sanction.

• Hybridity and Cross-Cultural Influence

Qajar art frequently blends Persian, Ottoman, and French elements — from Mehr Ali's imperial portraits evoking Solomon and Napoleon to the growing influence of European realism under Muhammad Shah.

• Gender, Performance, and the Royal Harem

Paintings of women in court and public entertainment reveal layered social realities — from idealized princesses to the blurred lines between public modesty and private sensuality.

• Shifts in Artistic Patronage

Political, financial, and military pressures (e.g., wars with Russia) shaped what types of art were produced. Declines in royal budgets led to innovations in lacquer and small-scale arts.

• Photography and Modern Reinterpretations

The film moves to the 19th and 20th centuries, showing the rise of photography in the Qajar era and how artists like Shirin Neshat and Shadi Ghadirian draw on Qajar iconography to explore contemporary social issues.

• Institutions and Rediscovery

Qajar art was long dismissed as naïve. Landmark exhibitions — especially the 1998 Brooklyn Museum show — were crucial in reevaluating and restoring its scholarly significance.

3. Historical Context

The Rise of the Qajar Dynasty

- Founded by Aqa Muhammad Khan, whose brutal consolidation created the basis for a unified Iran.
- Capital moved to **Tehran in 1786**, transforming a modest town into an imperial center.

Fath ‘Ali Shah’s Artistic Legacy

- Patron of architecture, poetry, calligraphy, and monumental painting.
- Commissioned vast palace decorations and set a visual template for kingship.

Political Pressures

- Iran’s geopolitical position between Russia and Britain intensified the need for a strong visual identity.
- Fiscal strain during Muhammad Shah’s reign curtailed palace commissions.

Women in Qajar Visual Culture

- Depictions of court women reveal intimate, private aesthetics that contrast with strict public norms.
- Zand and late Safavid precedents influenced these portrayals.

New Media: Photography

- Photographers like **Bahman Jalali** revived and preserved Qajar photographic traditions.
 - Photographic archives helped frame Qajar aesthetics for modern artists and audiences.
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4. Visual Analysis & “Look Closer” Sections

(Museum-education style prompts)

A. The Imperial Portrait of Fath ‘Ali Shah

Look closer:

- Identify elements emphasizing royal grandeur: beard length, jewel-studded garments, staff of office.
- How does the vertical composition convey power?
- Where do you see European influence? Where is the Persian tradition strongest?

Consider:

How does hybridity in this portrait serve political goals?

B. The “Saf-e Salaam” Wall Painting

Look closer:

- Examine how real political actors (sons, envoys) are represented in an “imagined” setting.
- How does scale contribute to ceremony and hierarchy?

Consider:

Why was this work reproduced more than any other Qajar image?

C. Muhammad Shah’s Transitional Portraits

Look closer:

- Compare his subdued palette and realism to Fath ‘Ali Shah’s opulence.
- Note the tension between European clothing and traditional kneeling posture.

Consider:

What does “transition” mean in visual terms?

D. Depictions of Women**Look closer:**

- How do settings, clothing, and posture define private versus public identities?
- Identify how idealization coexists with individuality.

Consider:

What do these images reveal about gender norms and courtly life?

E. Qajar Photographs and Their Modern Echoes**Look closer:**

- Observe symmetry, props, and staging in Qajar photography.
- How do contemporary artists use parody, irony, or critique?

Consider:

How does photography reframe a royal visual tradition for modern audiences?

5. Discussion Questions

(For classroom, museum groups, or public library programs)

Historical & Cultural Understanding

1. How did Qajar rulers use painting to legitimize their political authority?
2. In what ways did foreign relations shape Qajar artistic choices?
3. How does the film treat the relationship between gender and representation?

Artistic Analysis

4. What are the key visual differences between early Qajar portraiture and later 19th-century works?
5. How does Mehr Ali’s portrait of Fath ‘Ali Shah embody the idea of “hybrid imperial style”?

Modern Connections

6. Why might Qajar art have been dismissed for so long, and what changed in the 1990s?
7. How do Shirin Neshat and Shadi Ghadirian reinterpret Qajar images to comment on modern Iran?

Critical Reflection

8. What role do museums play in shaping global perceptions of Iranian art?
9. How does the film challenge or reinforce common narratives about Middle Eastern visual culture?

6. Key Terms & Concepts

- **Nazarbazi** (ritualized “play of gazes”)
- **Iwan** (arched ceremonial architectural space)
- **Hybridity**
- **Imperial portraiture**
- **Qajar lacquer painting**
- **Court photography**
- **Orientalism & counter-narratives**

7. Suggested Activities for Museum or Classroom Use

• Compare & Contrast Exercise

Students compare:

- A Mehr Ali portrait
- A late-Qajar realist portrait
- A contemporary reinterpretation (e.g., Ghadirian’s *Qajar* series)

• Visual Mapping

Assign groups to map European, Safavid, Zand, and tribal influences onto selected artworks.

• Curate a Mini-Exhibition

Students choose 5 images representing Qajar visual culture and write wall labels.

• “Recreate the Court” Role-Play

Using details from paintings, students reconstruct court ceremony and analyze symbolism.

8. Further Reading & Viewing

Books

- Layla S. Diba & Maryam Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch*.
- Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*.
- Shiva Balaghi, *Reconstructing Qajar Photography*.
- Ali Behdad & Luke Gartlan (eds.), *Photography's Orientalism*.

Articles

- Ekhtiar, “Qajar Art and the Poetics of Image-Making.”
- Diba, “The Image of the Shah.”

Exhibition Catalogues

- *Royal Persian Paintings*, Brooklyn Museum, 1998.
- *Facing the Kings: Qajar Royal Portraits*, various institutions.

Related Films

- *Shirin Neshat: A Film Retrospective*
 - *Bahman Jalali: Images of Iran*
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9. Credits

This guide is based on the transcript of *Of Kings and Paintings* and created for academic, museum, and public-library use.

10. Conclusion

This hybrid study guide provides educators, museums, and viewers with a structured framework for deeper engagement with *Of Kings and Paintings*. By combining academic analysis with

close-looking prompts, the guide supports multiple modes of learning and opens pathways for interdisciplinary exploration of Iranian visual culture.

11. Artworks Referenced in the Film

- **Portrait of Fath ‘Ali Shah**, by Mehr ‘Ali — c. 1815 — Golestan Palace Museum — appears at **06:40**
- **Saf-e Salaam**, Negarestan Palace mural — early 19th century — appears at **11:20**
- **Portrait of Muhammad Shah Qajar**, attributed to court artists — 1830s — Metropolitan Museum of Art — appears at **22:31**
- **Enamel Order of the Lion and Sun**, Muhammad Jafar — early 19th century — appears at **24:55**
- **Lacquer Casket (Siege of Herat)**, Muhammad Isma‘il Isfahani — 1830s — Bern Historical Museum — appears at **25:49**
- **Qajar Female Entertainers**, Zand–Qajar transitional paintings — late 18th century — Shiraz tradition — appears at **14:03**
- **Qajar Photography Reinterpretations**, Bahman Jalali, Shirin Neshat, Shadi Ghadirian — late 20th century — appears at **52:13**