

## ***Shahnameh* on Tile Canvas (Introduction and Recognition of the Visual Characters on the Ceramic Table of Abgineh Museum, Tehran)**

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### **Introduction**

The Qajar period is assumed to be the era of artistic and historical development in tile making techniques. In the meantime, human motifs in tiles were developed by promoting archaism. The trend of nationalism in art and its symmetry with the spread of Westernism caused the growth of artworks with Iranian kingdom and mythological themes. The ceramic table in Tehran's Abgineh and Pottery Museum, belonging to the Qajar era, with motifs of mythological warriors of *Shahnameh*, is an evidence for this. This ceramic table does not have any signature of the tile maker. A circular table with a radius of 63 cm, the layout of which consists of nine pieces of tiles, includes a central circular tile with a radius of 38 cm and eight side trapezoidal tiles. The main theme of the ceramic table motifs has been taken from the stories of *Shahnameh* and contains many floral, arabesque, and human motifs (figures of kings and mythical warriors).

### **Research Method**

So far studies have been carried out on two fundamental and related topics, namely, tile work of the Qajar period and the tile makers of this era. In-depth and detailed investigations and studies in this area mostly focused on the field of architecture, wall tiles, artifacts, the effect of various components in the formation of motifs, and their comparison with other works of art including manuscripts, paintings, photographs, and so on. This research focuses on those characters of *Shahnameh* who appeared on the mentioned table. The present research deals with the following: a) a recognition of motifs of Rostam and other heroes of *Shahnameh* in the scenes on the table and comparing them with similar scenes of lithographs and verses of *Shahnameh*; b) A study of the style regarding the characteristics of composition and aesthetic aspects of the table in Abgineh Museum. The research method is descriptive-analytical, and the data collection method is based on library sources and field visits. In this study, first the ceramic tables of Qajar period is introduced; then, the table in Abgineh Museum is carefully studied and analyzed.

### **Research Findings**

During the Qajar era, the travel of courtiers, students, and artists to Europe increased rapidly. These successive visits caused extensive cultural exchanges between Iranian and foreign artists. Besides, the nobles went to Europe (Farang), and on their return to Iran they commissioned imitated excelled European works of art to Iranian artists. One of these works was the ceramic table. These tables were popular in countries such as France and sought after by the wealthy class. They sometimes served as diplomatic gifts. Sevres Chinese factory was one of the centers, in which these tables were mass-produced. This center made products completely similar to the table in Tehran

Museum of Abgineh and Sofalineh. The use of furniture was very popular in the court, among nobles, and for the wealthy class of the society in the Qajar era. Regarding this, functional tools adopted more decorative and elegant styles. Among them, ceramic tables with wooden bases, generally round, were usually composed by tile makers in individual styles as a set of tiles with trapezoidal and circular shapes in the center. A large number of such ceramic tables with nationalistic, epic motifs were made in different parts of Iran and presented as luxurious, diplomatic gifts, or decorative elements in the houses and palaces. At least, three of them are available in the Ivory Hall of Golestan Palace. They were also sold in large auctions by anonymous individuals. Another large circular tile with the accession number 2428/18776, underglaze painting technique with a diameter of 50 cm with an image of bull riding Fereydoun conquering Zahak is available in the National Museum of Bucharest. This table belongs to the Qajar period. There are many other specimens of this incomplete table, which have mere central circular parts, in the collection of Golestan Palace. Another representative example of this type of table including the signature of Ali Mohammad Esfahani, the tile maker, is the table in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. This table, ordered by Murdoch Smith, was made with an outstanding and elaborate pattern. The subject of this study is the ceramic table of Abgine Museum, with access number 273.

### Conclusion

The ceramic table with access number 273, has a circular shape with a radius of 63 cm, with an arrangement consisting of eight trapezoidal tiles around the central part with a radius of 38 cm. The main themes are centered around the stories of *Shahnameh* including plants, urban, and court scenes, human figures, mainly that of kings and heroes of *Shahnameh*. The artist who created this work is unknown. There is no signature or a document to introduce him. In the central part of the table, above each human motif, there are names of mythological characters of *Shahnameh*. These names in order are: Zab, Kiyomarth, Firouz, Lahrseb, Ashkobus, Vishtaseb, Iskandar, and Afrasiab. These names provide the viewer with good hints to recall the stories of *Shahnameh*. They also depict the popularity of those stories in the society of the tile makers. However, in the surrounding trapezoidal tiles, there are no inscriptions that introduce people or refer to a specific story or narrative. Only based on a series of indicators taken from the verses of *Shahnameh*, the figures can be recognized. For instance, Rostam wearing a skin dress, a two-horned hat with a half of demon's face and a special two-parted beard. As a result, it can be assumed that the characters in front of Rostam are the same people that Rostam interacted with them through *Shahnameh*'s narratives such as Siavash, Sohrab, Zal, and so on. The appearance of these motifs on this table and other similar tables basically shows the promotion of antiquarian culture in the Qajar era with the approach of compensating for the sense of emptiness against the cultural invasion of the West. The effects of modernity resulted in the rise of national pride for the mythical ancient history and Persian literature, for which characters of *Shahnameh* were the best example. This feeling of pride towards Iranian nationality is completely evident in the artistic motifs, especially on the table in the Abgineh and Sofaline Museum. Each figure mentioned on the table had a hidden point in his/her mythological character to convey the artist's intention to preserve and honor these national values.

**Keywords:** Qajar tile making, mythical kings of *Shahnameh*, tile tables, Tehran Abgineh Museum.