



## The Pristine Intricate Kinetics of the Persian Revival

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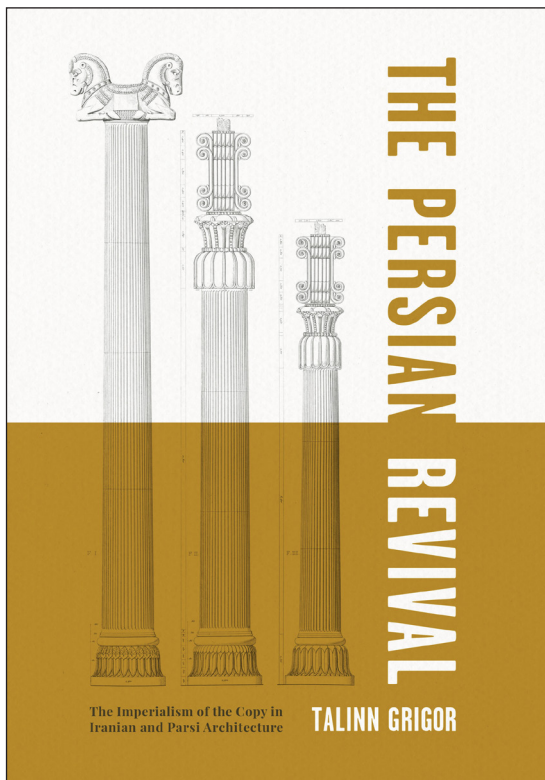
A review of Talinn Grigor, *The Persian Revival: The Imperialism of the Copy in Iranian and Parsi Architecture*, State College: Penn State University Press, 2021, 280 pages, 75 b&w illus. ISBN 978-0-271-08943-0. The book focuses on the Persian revival movement and its place in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iran and the broader Persianate world as well as on how Europeans understood ancient Iran from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how that understanding contributed to the thematics of the so-called Persian revival style. Grigor also analyses the contribution of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parsi community of India to the formation of certain Persian architectural concepts that became influential in Iran's early 20<sup>th</sup>-century architectural discourse. The book further emphasises the necessity of understanding global art history as a multilayered system of epistemological-methodological complexity rather than a flat site of homogeneity.

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Under the 20<sup>th</sup> century art-historical category of 'Orient-or-Rome,' Talinn Grigor's book *The Persian Revival: The Imperialism of the Copy in Iranian and Parsi Architecture* redirects readers' attention away from the conventional question of what the Persian revival movement was and instead explores agency behind the movement and how the movement related to the complex political and psychological milieu of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Persianate world. Grigor demonstrates how the Western imperial and art historical lens in the Persianate geohistorical context leads to the emergence of a new artistic and architectural language acting as a means of expression of selfhood and subjectivity.

The book is divided into three main chapters. Chapter 1 maps how Europeans understood the idea of ancient Iran from the decline of the Safavid Empire during mid-18<sup>th</sup> century until the apogee of the Orient-or-Rome debate at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The chapter also shows how European reception led to the formation of the artistic, architectural, and literary themes of the Persian revival style. Chapter 2 traces the Parsi community of India's development of Zoroastrian conceptions of Persianness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were substantiated in architectural forms and had a significant effect on the artistic architectural language of Iran in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chapter 3 offers a detailed examination and interpretation of the intricate mechanisms of the Persian revival style during the Zand, Qajar, and Pahlavi periods in Iran from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In chapter 1, Grigor focuses on the processes through which the idea of 'ancient' Iran finds its way into Western historiography and art historiography during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. She argues that the European fascination with ancient Iran is rooted in early modern European macro- and micropolitics of power and imperialism. The chapter revisits this concept by exploring the means through which textual and visual representations of ancient Iran were circulated. Then it shows how certain thematic and visual denotative codes that were introduced as representative became orthodox

in art-historical accounts. Finally, it explains “how this visual economy became a dominant counter colonial discourse about Iran as a foundational civilization” (8).

Narrated through three time periods (early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century; and late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century), chapter 2 details Indian Parsi architecture in the thematic contexts of British modernity, Iranian identity, and Freemasonry. Grigor argues that Parsis used the idea of ancient Iran to devise a self-identity that manifested itself in an architectural mode, one that was distinctive from other contemporary modes such as the Indian gothic revival. Through complex mechanisms of sociopolitical operation, these Persian visual artistic codes that aimed at reviving themes of Persian antiquity and Zoroastrianism acted as means of fashioning a distinguished ethno-religious identity for Parsis: “This desire to revive through a search for pure forms, backed by unprecedented wealth, set ablaze the Persian Revival in both Qajar and Parsi architecture” (72).

Chapter 3 — in many ways the most important chapter of the book — draws on several examples and archival documents to show how the stylistic methods of the Persian revival were devised, stabilised, and how they functioned. Beginning with a section titled “Post-Safavid Legacy of Revival, 1747–1848” covering the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Zand period, moving on to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Qajar period in a section titled “Imperial Revival of Persian Style, 1848–1896,” this chapter concludes with a review of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Pahlavi period in a section titled “Aryanization of Persian Revival, 1906–1939.” Grigor outlines the specific archaeological and historical knowledge Iranians acquired about ancient Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its corporeal representations in the form of ruins, compared to the previous periods (139). In another detailed analysis, Grigor draws parallels between the gestural characteristics of the Zand (and Qajar) figural stone reliefs and the Achaemenid figures on the Apadana at Persepolis, arguing that “for the first time since the fall of the Sassanians large figural reliefs on stone have been reintroduced in Iranian artistic practices” (147). While this argument is valid, we cannot be certain that the copying of the poses and gestures of the Persepolitan reliefs of the Achaemenid soldiers is as new as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon. Copies of illustrated manuscripts, such as in the cases of the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī, especially composed during the Safavid period (mainly in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century), exhibit traces of such gestures and orientation of the face and body when representing members of an army in special occasions amidst important battles between Iranians and foreign enemies.

While we cannot determine the references of these figures for Safavid painters, this visual evidence shows that pre-Zand-period artists were aware of such ancient Iranian artistic traditions and were already using them in their work. In this instance and a number of others, Grigor’s limiting the scope of the book results in her neglecting the

broader context in which so-called Persian revivalism took place. While 19<sup>th</sup>-century European engagement with Iran and its past no doubt accelerated the revival, it still does not necessarily represent a rupture or a moment in time. On the contrary, it might be better understood as a gradual and constant process that has been taking place in Iran at least since medieval times. This gradualism has important literary and political components that have to be taken into account in any analysis of contemporary artistic and architectural phenomena. As an example, we can refer to the diplomatic letters from Safavid Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 1587–1629) to Uzbeks in which figures of speech such as metaphor are used to establish parallels between the Safavid/ Uzbek confrontation and the Iran/Tūrān conflict in the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī or, occasionally, to describe the Shi‘i–Sunni dichotomy. Grigor emphasises the ‘art-historical’ focus of her study. However, the extent to which literary and artistic/textual and visual mechanisms are interwoven with Iranian history may mean that a single-discipline approach will be problematic. Artists, architects, and patrons were heavily rooted in the Persian literary tradition, especially poetry, and whether consciously or not, it provided a way of thinking, being, and operating and so informed the production of art and architecture. In other words, a parallel study of Iranian art history and Persian literary history may help to shed light on the complex aspects of art history that might remain obscure when looked at in isolation.

Grigor does mention the literary traditions of early modern Iran in certain cases, using them to support her argument. For example, in chapter 3, she argues that the literary style of *bāzgasht* (which revived the tradition of Iranian medieval poets such as Ḥāfiẓ and Sa‘dī) amounted to the state’s way of fashioning a literary revival (144). However, it is important to note that the *bāzgasht* style was not necessarily and merely a product of a deliberate state/royal decision. But it was an automatic and axiomatic reaction to previous literary styles, specifically, to the thematically different and exaggeratedly complex Isfahani style of poetry (especially the later Indian branch) that flourished during the Safavid period.

*The Persian Revival* is a solid work supported by layers of original research, mainly onsite but also diverse archival materials and documents. The way Grigor creates a cohesive theoretical framework by drawing on a combination of historical and architectural materials is masterful. Representing the Persian revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a response to and as resonating with European imperialism, she convincingly argues that this resonance resulted in complex mechanisms of resistance, even in control of the Western imperial power in architecture, rather than passivity. In the epilogue, one of the most sophisticated parts of the book both theoretically and methodologically, Grigor notes that “one of the pitfalls of the Western art

historiography is the assumption of this passivity, which in turn promotes the art historian to the pedestal of the active hero of history” (214). Grigor then critiques current interpretations of global art history, arguing that the primary role of the global art historian is “to uncover, to bring to light, the illusive modalities of the fallacy that art history has solidified into a science: the myth of homogeneity, the myth of purity, and the myth of the original” (214–215). Indeed, she shows that a truly global art history does not amount to a celebration or discovery of how arts in different geographies are similar or related to each other in a direct or linear way. Instead it constitutes an exploration of the different mechanisms of operation, reaction, or resonance rooted in diverse epistemological, methodological approaches and models that may not be part of the Western tradition. The current discourse of global art history extends the totalitarian approach that focuses on the homogeneity and ‘one-ness’ in the politics of state and migration. Grigor’s work not only makes a contribution to Persianate art history but reminds us of the necessity of reevaluating the approach to global art history in contemporary schools of art history.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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