



# Prologue

## *Fallacy of Origins*

The lavish yet bizarre architectural facades with winged men and distorted bulls first caught my fancy during my dissertation research. The mushrooming of what I call here the architecture of the Persian Revival in the 1930s seemed to appear out of nowhere. The accepted wisdom at the time was that it was all Reza Shah's idea, which made little historical sense, even then. He was not exactly a Renaissance man. At that time, few had delved deep into the study of the formation of Iranian nationalism in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, and even fewer among art historians. None had argued for a connection between the two art-historical branches of the Persian Revival: Parsi and Iranian. And few had drawn connections between Europe's Orient-or-Rome debate of 1901 and the art history of modern Iran and India. So, while I began with the intention to write the history of architectural revival in the 1920s and 1930s in Pahlavi Iran, my research pushed me further back in time in search of the beginnings of the artistic manifestations of that revival. It also landed me in Vienna and Mumbai.

The more I investigated, the more I realized that the iconic Pahlavi architecture—for instance, the National Bank building, the Tehran Police Headquarters, and the Museum of Iranian Antiquities—was the culmination of a story that began much earlier and far away from its proliferation in the heart of 1930s Tehran. The Persian Revival's antecedents have thus dictated the structural logic of this book, which has turned out to be an architectural history of grand facades fit for the eclectic long nineteenth century. In chasing the ideological trends related to the various forms of the revival, which might qualify as many revivals, and focusing on architectural style, this study is an art history of taste, of extravagant elevations that served as instruments of colonial prestige and national public instruction: first progressive, then despotic; at times

bigoted but mostly playful. It tells the story of a staunch nationalism that long cured in universalist, reformist, Freemasonic, and anticolonial ideals. Its artifacts were copies of copies. Influence, however, was no one-way process, nor modernity the dominion of one.

The narrative begins with Europe's discovery of ancient Iran first in philology and then in art history, starting with the effects of the 1699 Treaty of Carlowitz and the 1722 fall of the Safavid Empire. In 1901, Europe's racial and linguistic discourses erupted into the Orient-or-Rome debate. Pivoting on the passions around the debate, it proceeds with the art history of the Persian Revival movement in light of imperial strategies of power, selfhood, and statehood in British India and Zand-Qajar-Pahlavi Iran. Drawing on a wide range of Persian Revival narratives bound to architectural history—from European travelogues to Bombay architecture, from Masonic paraphernalia to Persian reliefs and pillared halls—this study foregrounds the complexities and magnitude of artistic appropriations of Western art history, which were carried out in order to grapple with colonial ambivalence and imperial aspirations. It explores how reformist Iranians and Indians turned Europe's fetish of ancient Aryan Persia upon itself. The ensuing conversations that shaped Iranian and Indian cities were visual expressions of struggles for reform as well as rare moments in architectural embrace of contemporary (bad) taste, originality (and its copies), and universality (as a tribal trope). Around these art-historical debates and edifices, locals negotiated a unique brand of modernity.

Chapter 1 traces European engagement with ancient Iran from 1765 to the eruption of the Orient-or-Rome debate in 1901 and the subsequent use of this visual history and historiography in Parsi and Iranian invention of the Persian Revival style. Chapter 2 examines the Parsi invention of a Persian racial and artistic lineage centered on Bombay from the 1830s to the 1910s and the export of this exilic architecture into Qajar Iran in the 1910s. And chapter 3 traces the evolution of the Iranian brand of the Persian Revival, starting from the artistic revivalistic interventions of Karim Khan Zand in eighteenth-century Shiraz and continuing through the long Qajar century of significant leaps in cultural revivals that culminated in the official adoption of the style by the Pahlavi state in 1925. An epilogue raises theoretical questions about the influence of the copy in its colonial context. Instead of asking what art is, it ponders what art does, especially when casting into the imperial domain. Premised on postcolonial and critical theories, the book argues that while Western imperialism was instrumental in shaping high art as a mercantile-bourgeois ethos, it was also a project that destabilized the hegemony of a Eurocentric historiography of taste.

Despite art history's neglect, Persian Revival architecture is significant for three reasons. First, it confirms the global circulation and connectivity of aesthetic discourses, thus complicating the art-historical faith in Western origins and native copies. If the Enlightenment had bestowed high civilizational credits on historical longevity and

artistic sophistication, nineteenth-century Iranians and Parsis felt that they had a lot of both, and they honed them against Europe's expansions. The Persian Revival was the most alluring expression of that art-historical arrogation. Methodologically, this study argues that there are no bad copies in art history, only edifices that reveal broader forms of sociopolitical resistance expressed in aesthetic discourses. To relegate them to the category of bad art and thus to ignore them, as we have, is to miss the point. Instead of marching into a losing battle, Iranians and Parsis commissioned revivalistic facades as evocations of their best, most modern selves. Examined here for the first time as an art-historical subject matter with the potential to respond to broader art-historical questions, the Persian Revival style is parsed not by what it is but by how it has been ignored due to what it lacks; not by what it meant but by how it functioned in the discursive field of visual meaning, articulating a politics of visibility and visibility; not by what it was (i.e., beautiful, original, Persian) but by what it did (i.e., endorsed or resisted colonialism, legitimized or poked fun at power). After the Persian Revival became a recognizable style, its purchase on Iranian identity expanded globally to anywhere that Iranians and Parsis set foot; any Iranian deli or restaurant in Los Angeles or Toronto will testify to its resilience.

Second, the Persian Revival is significant because it enables us to rethink the dialectics of text and artifact. This book attempts a new interpretation of the network of travelogues on Iran, native writings deploying modern visual technologies, and histories of world architecture and thus bares how they sowed the seeds of both the Persian Revival and such monuments of Iranian art history as Arthur Pope's *Survey of Persian Art* (1939). The nineteenth century witnessed a paradigm shift in the function of visibility and visual proof. Indeed, the presence of drawings and plans, asserting detached accuracy, constituted the evidence itself. In part due to the rapid evolution of the sciences, the physical object took the place of philological speculation in such disciplines as anthropology, prehistory, craniology, and archeology, shaping the evaluation of both Aryan theory and non-Western art history. "Linguistic imperialism," as Leon Poliakov notes, slowly gave way to a closer look at the object.<sup>1</sup> The dependence of the object on the text, and therefore the resentment of some art historians toward philology—or rather hostility toward a favoring of textual sources over visual evidence—reverberates in the current production of Iranian art history. Although drawing on multiple and rarely cross-pollinated areas of knowledge, this study is based on the discipline of art history. Cold War area studies dealt a blow to the advancement of non-Western art history because they subordinated art-historical analysis to textual sources and thus skewed the parameters and methods by which a body of artifacts came to be classified as Iranian art.

Here I contend that while the Persian Revival must be properly and thoroughly contextualized within its historical setting, the wide range of complicated domains

out of which it evolved—that is, literary, epistemic, linguistic, archeological, Iranian, Indian, European, Masonic, nationalist, romanticist, universalist—it is a moment in the history of art that can only be explained through the methodological tools of that discipline. The Persian Revival, like its European counterpart, the Gothic Revival, while started as a literary movement, cannot be aptly understood without art-historical scrutiny. By the 1930s, the origin of the Gothic itself had been traced back to Iran.<sup>2</sup> It should come as no surprise that Austrian scholar Josef Strzygowski—the first occupant of the first chair of non-Western art history—dissented against the “tyranny of text” over the artifact and accused its champions of being armchair art historians. Nina Garsoïan, the scholar who masterfully straddled Armenian, Byzantine, and Sassanian histories, underscored her “conviction that only a juxtaposition of the surviving visual evidence with the fragmentary textual material could lead to some understanding of the civilization that produced them.”<sup>3</sup> This Persian Revival story straddles three continents, stretching from Vienna to Tehran to Bombay, with a few detours in Shiraz, Surat, London, Paris, New York, and the Napa Valley.

The third reason the Persian Revival is significant is that it occasions a new discussion about old debates regarding art history’s global turn. As Strzygowski insisted a century ago, many art historians of non-Western art continue to elude the snare of the armchair despite multiple obstacles hindering access to their objects of study, including inadequate funding and sabbaticals and the risk of incarceration or detention in the country where their objects of study are found. For this book, access to the edifices in Iran was truncated due to circumstances triggered by rigged elections and economic sanctions, while entrance to Parsi fire temples was curtailed by religious orthodoxy. There were other challenges. First, in Parsi studies the primary focus has been given to the religious and socioeconomic history of Parsi communities to the exclusion of architecture; the Persian Revival Parsi temples do not appear in mainstream architectural studies of the British Raj either. Second, when these temples are discussed, their architectural qualities are rarely addressed because in Zoroastrianism what matters is the sacred fire. In dating, for instance, the date of the establishment of the fire often supersedes the date of the edifice. Historical accounts, as well as secondary sources, habitually confuse the two and privilege the former. Third, given the dense urban context of the buildings explored here, it was challenging to produce unobstructed photographs in India. In Iran, likewise, I was forbidden to photograph many of the Persian Revival edifices due to their present functions as ministries, banks, and police headquarters. Fourth, the clusters of knowledge—art history, archeology, Iranian studies, Parsi studies, Masonic studies, and so forth—that benefit this work rarely cross-pollinate.

During discussion of the prehistory of a Persian antique revival, a late medievalist colleague spoke about her “gripe with modern historians who make so much of the focus on pre-Islamic Persian history,” adding, “they act like it wasn’t there before, which

is just simply not true, instead of asking what was new about how it was articulated.<sup>74</sup> This study is about the complex processes of different branches of that articulation. The Persian Revival architecture was itself a material enunciation by Iranians and Parsis, who mapped the unstable discursive effects of postcoloniality. This was often about collective anxiety but also an elitist aspiration. By that token, my narrative, like those about whose anxieties and aspirations I write, remains within the boundaries of art-historical and discursive interpretations. To understand how the ancient Iranian legacy was received and revived, I have refrained from linguistic, archeological, or literary examinations—these fall within neither my expertise nor the aims of this work. When addressing the copying of Achaemenid and Sassanian originals or the historical veracity of the Orient-or-Rome debate or, indeed, the Aryanness of Persians and Parsis, my narrative remains in the discursive realm of modernity. The question of what really happened is suspect to me. I have instead tried to explain how a collective of modernists crafted a discourse about what they thought happened, because the Persian Revival is not a function of historical retrievals but a fascinating historicist imagining in brick and stone.