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Gift and Glory Two Narratives of a Safavid Mission in Venice

Negar Rokhgar

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Article abstract

The gift of a velvet with repeating patterns of the Virgin Mary nursing Christ (Madonna del Latte) from Shah Abbas of Safavid Persia to the Republic of Venice is often interpreted as the embodiment of the Shah's two-fold political and commercial motivations in pursuing his transcultural allegiance with Venice against the Porte. This paper explores the Shi'a Safavid iconography of the biblical imagery on this velvet and rereads it as a Safavid attempt in defining commonality across cultures through visual media. This vision differs significantly with the Venetians' perception of the Shah's luxurious gifts and letters, which is reflected in Gabriele Caliarì's painting of the Safavid reception by Doge Grimani in 1603, in Palazzo Ducale, Venice. The paper analyzes the two visions of the Safavids and the Venetians in a comparative study of the period's textual and visual materials. It explores how the gifts such as the Madonna del Latte velvet facilitated diplomatic negotiations with Christian Europe, whereas painted representations such as Caliarì's reveal much about the perception of cultural difference in early modern courts.

NEGAR ROKHGAR

Pratt Institute

Gift and Glory: Two Narratives of a Safavid Mission in Venice

Several months before Shah Abbas I (r. 1587–1629) of Safavid Persia initiated another conflict against the Ottomans, a Persian delegation arrived in Venice. On March 5, 1603, they were formally received in the *Sala del Collegio*. This event is documented in a copy kept in the State Archive of Venice.¹ The Venetian artist Gabriele Caliari (1568–1630) immortalized this event through a grand painting in Palazzo Ducale, Venice, during the same year (figure 1). Led by two Safavid ambassadors, Muhammad Amin Beg and Fathi Beg, this documented mission carried a letter and precious gifts to present to the Doge of Venice. Caliari seemingly captured the moment when the Persians presented these splendid gifts to the majesty of the Republic. Before delving into an examination of Caliari's painting, I aim to closely analyze the catalogue and characteristics of the gifts bestowed by Shah Abbas I upon his Venetian counterpart. This initial inquiry is essential for understanding the significance of gifts and their material embodiment in illuminating the Persian strategy towards cultivating an alliance with Venice. Moreover, it will enable an evaluation of whether Caliari's artwork successfully encapsulates the intricate intentions communicated through

the Persian offerings.² The following outlines the gifts³:

Nine items (*yek toghūz*) were selected by the Shah to be presented as gifts to the Republic: one mantle of gold-embroidered fabric, a velvet carpet with gold threads, one gold-embroidered velvet with the figures of Christ and Mary (*ʿĪsā va Maryam*), three *tāq* (each *tāq* is about fifty meters) gold-embroidered fabrics, and three *tāq* plain fabrics.

This list, which was originally written in the calligraphic *Nastaʿliq* hand in the Persian language, is recorded in three other documents at the State Archive of Venice, including one by the *Procuratori di Supra* (Administrators of the properties of St Mark's Basilica).⁴ In the latter document, recorded on March 9, 1603, the gifts are described with more explicit details. According to this document, the velvet carpet had silk and gold threads and was four to three *braccia* (about four meters and seventy-five centimeters) and the Christ and Mary velvet was a seven *braccia* (about four-and-half meters) silk. The pack of six *tāq* fabrics was composed of three silk cloths with golden patterns and three robes of plain silk (no gold).⁵



The receipt for the presents specifies that the Christ and Mary velvet cloth had fourteen figures (*con quattordici figure*).⁶

As is evident, all nine gift items were textiles and among those, silk particularly stands out. The material culture of the gifts was a vehicle for Shah Abbas's 'diplomatic marketing,' as I would call it. By the start of the seventeenth century, Shah Abbas had turned the two important raw silk-producing cities of Gilan and Mazandaran along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea into crown-owned estates (*Khasseh*) and established a state monopoly on the production and exportation of silk (Steinmann 1987). The Shah's dominion over foreign trade swiftly developed a centralized economic system under his rule in which silk was the main item for sale.⁷ Thus, the Shah's gifts of silk to Venice signified his imperial self-fashioning and a boast

Figure 1

Gabriele Caliari, *Il Doge Marino Grimani riceve i doni degli ambasciatori persiani nel 1603*, Venice, Palazzo Ducale, Sala delle Quattro Porte.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Embassy_to_Europe.jpg

about his flourishing silk industry and market. At the same time, the Shah rehearsed another integration of Christian figural representations within a Safavid gift with the figure of Christ and Mary embroidered on a silk velvet that spoke to the visual idioms with which the Doge and his Venetian entourage were most identified, yet it was immersed in Safavid Persian connotations through its material culture and Shi'a iconography.⁸

Only three years prior to Fathi Beg's mission, in May 1600, Shah Abbas's envoy Asad Beg presented a gift of a velvet with gold-embroidered scenes of

the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary woven in repeating patterns to the Republic of Venice.⁹ The gift was highly admired in Venice and was later hung in the Ducal Palace in the Hall of the most important governing body of the Republic, the Council of Ten (*Consiglio dei Dieci*).¹⁰ Thus, the Christ and Mary velvet is seen as another diplomatic practice in which the Shah incorporated Biblical subject matter to cater towards his Christian allies and incite his European targets to pursue their alliance with the court of Persia.

In addition to the connotations conveyed by this particular cultural amalgamation, the figural depiction on the Christ and Mary velvet holds significant distinction from the Annunciation velvet. In the subsequent paragraphs, after conducting a thorough visual analysis of the textile gift, I will highlight the incorporation of this specific biblical scene into the Shah's silk, a source of his great pride, and its presentation as an appropriate gift to the Republic of Venice.

On the gold-embroidered silk presented by Fathi Beg in March 1603, the Virgin Mary is represented in a cross-legged seated position in a landscape, nursing the Christ Child (figure 2).¹¹ As the Virgin holds him in her right arm, she reveals her breast for the Child to suckle, while the Christ Child extends his hand to grasp it. Both figures are distinguished by halos adorned with golden pointed flames, a characteristic feature of Safavid depictions of Shi'a Muslim holy figures.¹² This stylized visual hierarchy distinguishes the Virgin and Christ Child from another female companion, who stands modestly next to the Virgin holding a cloth, presumably to hold the Child afterwards. On

the receipt of the Shah's gifts to the Republic in 1603, this silk was recorded as a brocade with fourteen figures embroidered on it. However, since fourteen is an even number, and in each scene, three figures are represented, the number must reflect the unit of the three figures that was originally repeated fourteen times on the seven-*braccia* silk velvet (Berchet, 1865, 46; Gallo 1967, 261).¹³



Figure 2
Silk Velvet with the figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, Isfahan, late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Venice, Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo, Cl. XXII, II.37.

Between the holy figures and the attendant, there is a pond with fish and a landscape with shrubs and sprouting flowers. In a 1994 publication, Gauvin Bailey suggested that the shrubs were references to the palm tree that is associated with the Nativity in Islamic tradition (Bailey 1995, 33). Sinem Casale elaborated on Bailey's interpretation and referred to the Qur'anic version of the Nativity, which translates:

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree: She cried (in her anguish): "Ah! would that I had died before this! would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!" But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): "Grieve not! for thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee; and shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree; it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee."¹⁴

Casale argued that because the Virgin Mary was alone in the Qur'anic version of the Nativity, the attendant "might be intended to represent an angelic being whose voice calms Mary by telling her about the stream and the palm tree" (Casale 2015, 643). Clearly, there is a pond and a tree included in this composition. I disagree, however, that this is a scene of the "Nativity" as in such imageries, the scene typically includes the infant Christ lying in a manger with Mary and Joseph standing or sitting nearby. Often, there are also animals present, such as cows, sheep, or donkeys, as well as shepherds who have come to worship the newborn Christ. In the absence of the representations of Joseph, the above-mentioned animals, and any visual clues to a stable where Christ was born or a manger, I reread the scene on the Safavid velvet as a *Madonna del Latte* (Madonna Lactans), a Christian iconographic representation of the Virgin Mary suckling the infant Christ. The image essentially celebrates the Virgin's maternal devotion and model piety as well as the human nature of Christ.

As recorded in the Venetian accounts of Fathi Beg's reception, the Safavid ambassador delivered the Shah's wish to

the Doge about displaying the velvet with the figure of Christ and Mary in the Church of San Marco.¹⁵ This particular request, I argue, buttresses the theory that the Safavid *Madonna del Latte* velvet was a gift tailored not only to the beliefs of its Christian recipient, as argued previously by Casale, but also to the desired setting for its display in the Church of San Marco to manifest the Shah's recognition of the Church. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain whether the Shah also aimed to incorporate the iconographic implications of the *Madonna del Latte*, which symbolize Mary as the Mother of the Church, interceding for the Church and its adherents. As was requested by the Shah, this gift of velvet was designed for the Church of San Marco and this was even distinguished from that silk velvet carpet among the gifts that the Shah, relayed by Fathi Beg, wished to offer to the Treasury of San Marco, so the luxurious carpet would be on view once every year.¹⁶

The Shah's requests about his gifts being displayed in specific settings reveal two important observations. First, the Shah was well informed about the religious and cultural circumstances of these two interrelated Venetian institutions. Second, designing the Persian *Madonna del Latte* for the Church of San Marco connotes that the Shah had knowledgeable Christian advisors at his court to enlighten him with those subtle iconographical references. This may be contextualized by the fact that, in 1599, two Portuguese friars arrived in Isfahan via the southern port city of Hormuz, the Franciscan Fra Alfonso Cordero, and the Dominican Nicolau de Melo (Pinto 2018, 154). The Dominican friar declared himself the Bishop of Hormuz and a

nuncio of the pope and the King of Spain.¹⁷ The Shah gratefully welcomed the friars and gave Nicolau de Melo a (now lost) precious thirteenth-century golden cross, embellished with diamonds, turquoise, and rubies.¹⁸ During their stay at the Court of Isfahan, the Shah shared his curiosity about the state of the papacy and asked fundamental questions about Christian rituals, and finally in 1599, he dispatched them with his ambassadors Anthony Shirley and Husayn `Ali Beg Bāyāt to Europe to facilitate the anti-Ottoman negotiations (Falsafi 2015, 14–15; Alonso 1989, 161–65).

The two Portuguese friars were not the only Christian missionaries at the court of Shah Abbas in Persia. In 1600, Pope Clement VIII (r. 1592–1605) dispatched two Portuguese nuncios, Francisco da Costa (Jesuit) and Diego de Miranda (layman), to Isfahan. This was in response to the “false” news rumored by Asad Beg in Venice about the Safavid Shah’s willingness to convert with his children to Roman Catholicism and to establish a Portuguese Augustinian mission in Hormuz (Kāwūsī ‘Irāqī 2000, 11). The Pope immediately sent the two nuncios to express his joy over the good news of the Shah’s inclination to join the Christian religion and to propose a joint action against their most hostile enemy (Savory 2007, 107). Between 1602 and 1608, more nuncios arrived at the Court of Isfahan that reinforced the cross-religious relations between the Safavids and the Roman Church (Kāwūsī ‘Irāqī 2000, 135). The fundamental role that these figures played in the course of the Safavid-European, anti-Ottoman campaign in the early seventeenth century is a substantial topic that is beyond the scope

of this paper.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it is illuminating to note that the Shah allowed those nuncios and their Christian communities to preach freely, perform their rituals, and build churches in different provinces of the Safavid realm. Furthermore, the Shah had local sources of knowledge about Christianity, namely the Armenians who were a group of minorities under the Safavid reign, whose state was a public reflection of the Shahs’ ‘tolerance’ and position towards Christendom. The Safavid acceptance of the Christian developments in Persia was a tactic to obtain the Church’s support against the mutual enemy. Hence, it is not inconceivable to envision that the Shah must have had religious advisors at his court for his negotiations with Christian Europe, and that those priests presumably counseled him in his selection and modifications of the diplomatic gifts.²⁰

Although the Safavid *Madonna del Latte* thematically blended seamlessly with its desired setting, the visual features, such as the pointed flame-haloes and the cross-legged seating position of the Virgin made the object oscillate between the two cultures. The fiery halo symbolizes the Shi’a concept of divine enlightenment (*Nūr-e Mohammadi*) of Prophet Mohammad and his cousin, Alī ibn Abī Ṭāleb, who, according to Shi’a ideology, was the rightful successor of the Prophet (Rubin 1975, 105). A fine example of the Safavid vision of the Prophetic enlightenment is a mid-sixteenth-century illustration that is nestled in a manuscript titled *Fālnāma* (The Book of Divinations) (figure 3).²¹ The illustration narrates a miraculous event from the life of Prophet Muhammad, in which the prophet heals a sick boy. The Prophet is depicted veiled

in conventional Islamic tradition and haloed with pointed flames of light in Shi'a Safavid fashion, which is comparable to the haloes in the gifted velvet (Welch 1979, 138–41). As a visual rendition of sanctity in Shi'a Safavid painting, the flame-halo in the *Madonna del Latte* velvet signifies an inherent, yet emblematic artistic exchange, through which the Shah communicated a two-fold message; his knowledge and tolerance toward his Christian subjects and his attempts to cross the divide and define a shared visual language that spoke to both cultures.²² The Shah's *Madonna del Latte* associated the holiest figures of Christianity with those of Shi'ism through the visual element of a stylized halo. In addition, the crossed-legged sitting position of the Virgin visually 'Persianized' Mary through a traditional gesture long rooted in Persian painting.²³

Shi'ism was a Safavid religious establishment in Persia between 1501 and 1722. By the time of the rise of the Safavids to power in the early sixteenth century and their strategic conversion to Twelver Imami Shi'ism, the Persians developed clashing theological viewpoints with the neighboring Sunni Ottomans, compounding their historical struggles over territory.²⁴ The intensified tensions between the two Muslim courts of the period led the Persians to reinforce a military alliance with Europe to assault the Porte (Ottoman Court) on both sides, from sea and land.²⁵ The Safavid promulgation of Shi'ism prevented Persia's potential annexation into Sunni Ottoman possession and put Persia in permanent hostility with the Sunni Turks (Falsafi 2015, 13–14). As a theocratic state where religion and politics were intricately intertwined, the establishment of Shi'ism

in Persia was, on the one hand, a defensive move to free the Safavid reign from Sunni-Ottoman hegemony. On the other hand, the intensity of this religious discrepancy brought the Persians closer to their European allies, as both shared the same enemy, who threatened them territorially and religiously.



Figure 3
"Muhammad Revives the Sick Boy" featuring the Shi'a Safavid flame-halo, Folio from a *Fāhnāma* (Book of Divination) of Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), ca. 1550, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451016>

When read in these contexts, the Safavid *Madonna del Latte* silk velvet connoted the Shah's economic, artistic, religious, and political prowess in his relations with Europe. The material culture of the gift conveyed the Shah's luxury gained by his monopoly over silk production and exportation, as well as his military potency in imposing his power over

those formerly independent provinces with a flourishing silk industry. The figural imagery of the textile stood between a Safavid painting of Shi'a sanctity and a Christian iconography of Mary and Christ Child. The Shah's request for the velvet's display in the Church of San Marco recalled his acquaintance with those iconographical significances, which emerged from a religio-political campaign between Persia and the Roman Church that developed Christian communities, convents, and churches in Persia. Finally, Shah Abbas's Persianized *Madonna del Latte* in the Church of San Marco projected the Safavid Shah's recognition of this Venetian ecclesiastical institution within the political body of the Republic, wherein Shah Abbas wished to settle an agent of his court.

Gabriele Caliarì's Painting of the Persian Reception

Shah Abbas's lavish textile gifts served to add nuance to the imperial image that he sought European powers to acknowledge. However, in Gabriele Caliarì's painting *Il Doge Marino Grimani riceve I doni dagli ambasciatori persiani* ("Doge Marino Grimani Receives the Gifts of the Persian Ambassadors") at the *Palazzo Ducale*, I posit that the reception of Fathi Beg was approached from a distinct perspective, one that reflected the values and interests of the Venetian Republic [figure 1]. The painting is oil on a grand canvas in *Sala delle Quattro Porte*, which was the antechamber to the more important rooms of the *Sala dell'Anticollegio* and the *Sala del Senato* of the Ducal Palace in Venice.²⁶ Caliarì adorned the wall on the right of the entrance to the Senate Room with Fathi Beg's reception, for the

contemplation of those in passage to or waiting to be received in the Chamber of the Great Council.

The painting captures the moment when the luxurious gifts of the Shah are being taken out of a box and his letter is being read to the Doge. Four Venetians in black garments and white neck ruffles spot the painting in places where different episodes of the reception ceremonies are taking place. One of the Venetians in the foreground has his right arm on another figure in a red vestment and a green cape. The Venetian has been identified as the official interpreter and dragoman of the Republic, Giacomo de Nores, who organized this visit (Berchet 1865, 44–45). In Caliarì's painting, he has been bestowed with a visual emphasis as he actively introduces the other figure, presumably another Armenian in the group of the Persian legates, who accompanied Fathi Beg.²⁷ At the very center of the foreground, a glamorous gift of a silk with a gold-embroidered decorative pattern in a symmetrical design catches the eye of the viewer. Observing the gift-giving scene and the reception in progress, the Venetian officials of different political ranks in red and blue garments are represented seated in two levels, on the right side of the mid-ground.

Shifted to the left upper part of the canvas, Doge Grimani is enthroned on his seat atop a number of steps and an oriental carpet under his feet marks his elevated rank. Two Persian dignitaries in official Safavid regalia flank the Doge.²⁸ Toward the center of the canvas, on the Doge's left side, sits another Persian dignitary in splendid garments with his left hand grabbing the edge of his shimmering coat: a golden cloak

embellished with delicate vegetal pattern over a bright robe with similar golden design distinguishes this figure from the other turbaned dignitaries in traditional “Safavid ambassador” costumes, with plain silk mantles and golden frog buttons over a bright *qaba*’ (a long garment with sleeves) with a twisted silk belt wrapped around their waist (figure 4). The shine in his regalia reveals that it was of fine silk, just like the gift of textile with golden design in the foreground that has already created astonishment among the Venetians. The turbaned figure in rich silk garments is Fathi Beg, Shah Abbas’s special agent, who, accompanied with six other Persians and three Armenians, led the second Persian mission in Venice, in March 1603 (Tonini 2014, 28–29). The Persian dignitaries’ distinct *dastār* (white turbans) with twelve folds that symbolized their Twelver-Imami Shi’a faith and a red baton on top (*tāj-e Safavi*) distinguish them from other figures in the painting: the Venetians, the Armenians, and other Persians of lower ranks.²⁹

In the most apparent interpretation, Caliari’s painting illustrates Fathi Beg’s reception and the opulent gifts he presented to the Doge of Venice on behalf of his master, Shah Abbas I. Caliari’s painting was a contribution to the decorative program of a hall with a group of allegorical sculptures of the virtues, frescoes of mythological subjects and cities under Venetian dominion in a self-celebrating decorative scheme honoring the city of Venice, and her institutions, aristocratic heritage, and role as *antemurale della Christianità* (bulwark of Christendom) (Rota 2009, 232; Wolters 1983, 228–29). Caliari’s artistic interpretation of Fathi Beg’s reception, I believe, was a visual medium to propagate the

excellence of the Venetian Republic.³⁰ The painting renders the scene with Muslim Persians offering precious gifts to the *Serenissima* (Venetian, the Most Serene Republic). The Doge’s stare from his majestic seat at the glittering gold-embroidered silk brocade in the foreground promotes the idea that Caliari’s painting was to stress the Republic’s prosperity in global diplomacy and commerce. While a Venetian official is reading the Shah’s letter to the Doge and an interpreter is whispering to the Persian ambassador, the Doge directs his gaze towards the luxurious textiles from the far land of silk-producing centers and monopoly of global silk trade, offered in honor of his State.



Figure 4
Giovanni Grevembroch, “Persian Ambassador” in *Gli abiti de Veneziani di quasi ogni età con diligenza raccolti e dipinti nel secolo XVIII* (Book of Habits in Venice Collected and Painted in the Eighteenth century), Venice, Museo Correr, Biblioteca, Ms. Gradenigo Dolfin 49, vol. II, tav. 122.

From the Safavid perspective, along with the silk carpet sent by the Shah as a tribute to the Treasury and the *Madonna del Latte* velvet intended for the Church of San Marco, an exquisite gold-embroidered mantle was also sent. (*un manto tessuto d'oro*), as relayed by the Persian envoy. The Shah had it tailored especially for the Doge in one piece with no seams, as a memento of himself. In a scholarly context, this suggests that the Shah intended to recognize prominent figures within the ecclesiastical and political body of the Republic, aiming to reconcile with them through his individual gifts. Historical records attest that the Persian envoy informed the Doge that a similar mantle had been crafted for the Shah's ally, Mughal Emperor Akbar I (r. 1556–1605).³¹ Considering that this is indeed the case, as evidenced by the document, Shah Abbas signaled his alliance with the Mughals (1526–1857), to the Doge of Venice. This gesture aimed to bolster his diplomatic and commercial pact with *Serenissima*, thereby securing advantages privileges for the Republic, such as a safe trade route to the flourishing market of India.

In September 1603, Fathi Beg and his retainers returned to their master with a ducal letter, a copy of which archived in Venice, expressing kinship between the two states and gifts worth 3,360 ducats.³² In addition to the Venetian royal presents, Fathi Beg returned with the weaponry that was requested by the Shah in his message to the Doge.³³ Within the archived letter explored earlier in this paper, the Shah sought the Doge's assistance in procuring the necessary artillery and superior combat equipment (*Yerāgh*) for the Persian agents (figure 5). The documented return of the Shah's envoy

with the said weapons suggests that the Republic either permitted or facilitated the Persians' acquisition of necessary military equipment for their conflicts against the Ottomans, which included forthcoming battles from 1603 to 1612. In essence, the Venetians indirectly supported the Persian forces in their anti-Ottoman engagements.



Figure 5
Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Fasc. Persia, Doc. 8, no. 25 (ex. XII.8.25) Persian copy.

The Venetian gifts included a bowl with gilded silver figural engravings, silver bowls and jugs, a silver flask with studded glass, a full suit of armor (scale armor), and four harquebuses decorated with pearls and gold.³⁴ The nature of the ducal gifts to Persia, with all the gold and silver supplies and decorated weapons, affirm two notions. First, the Shah's trade in Persian silk facilitated the commercial exchange with Europeans. Among all the

items that he ordered his agents to purchase were fine suits of armor and battle equipment, which illuminates the privileges the Shah gained through his international commerce. Second, through his silk trade with Europe, the Shah acquired silver and gold to strike coins to be used in global commerce, particularly with India (Canby 2009, 24, 72). In fact, the monetary value of those ducal gifts (3,360 ducats) to Fathi Beg compared to that of Asad Beg's earlier mission (200 ducats) already indicates that the Shah had immensely developed trade with the Republic.³⁵ Reciprocally, the *Serenissima* recognized the value of the Shah's embassy to Venice, as well as this cross-religious diplomacy through his royal gifts.

However, upon initial observation, Caliarì's painting fails to depict the mutual recognition inherent in this historical event. Instead, the artwork presents a scene wherein the Shah's gifts deliberately evoke a sense of tribute (*pīškāš*) (Pedani 1994, 69).³⁶ In my analysis, this portrayal serves to manipulate the perception of Shah Abbas's intentions with his embassy to Venice, particularly the message he intended his valuable gifts to convey. Caliarì's depiction of Fathi Beg's reception essentially glorifies the Venetian Republic, asserting its superiority over Muslims. However, there are deeper layers of connotation that warrant further exploration.

Visual Hierarchies and Symbolic Motifs in Caliarì's Painting

In the forefront of the painting, positioned before the Doge's throne, two dogs of distinct breeds are depicted—one held by a Venetian figure and the other

under the care of a young Persian servant. Camillo Tonini has suggested that the portrayal of these two dogs, depicted with grace, may symbolize faithfulness.³⁷ However, it remains uncertain whether this portrayal of loyalty, as suggested by Tonini, symbolized a mutual allegiance between the two powers or was intended to depict the Persians' devotion to the Republic. In the subsequent analysis, I explore the subtle implications brought forth by these compositional elements, particularly the dogs, within Caliarì's painting at the Palazzo Ducale. Supported by the examination of additional diplomatic gifts, such as a missive from Shah Abbas to the King of Spain, and an earlier papal communication, I posit that these two dogs serve as a visual allusion to the Turks.

Following the Peace of Zsitvatorok in November 1606, which marked the end of a fifteen-year war between Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II Hapsburg and Sultan Ahmed I, the Ottomans shifted their focus to uprisings in Asia, including those in Persia. In 1607, Shah Abbas dispatched a diplomatic mission to Philip III of Spain, who held sway over Portuguese territories (including Goa) and parts of southern and northern Italy. In his letter, the Shah implored the Spanish king to deploy his formidable fleet to the Persian Gulf, providing assistance to the Persians in their struggle against Turkish invasions with harquebuses and artillery.³⁸ In a bid to secure the King's military support, the Shah articulated his ambition to reclaim the territories once ruled by his ancestor "Ismael" (Esmā'īl II Safavid (r. 1576–1577), including the prominent cities of Baghdad and Cairo. He underscored his commitment to ensuring that all

Christian inhabitants within his realm would be afforded the same rights and freedoms as their Muslim counterparts (Cockerell and Plummer 1969, 13–14). Shah Abbas conveyed to Philip III his assurance that, with his support, they could overthrow the Turkish regime, leading to Philip's ascendancy as the Emperor of Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), while Shah Abbas would seamlessly assume control over Egypt and Syria (specifically Cairo and Baghdad). This declaration under-scored a mutual benefit: an expansion of territories under Shah Abbas's rule would also provide the Roman Church with an extended Asiatic domain to advance Catholicism, with the added prospect of Constantinople's restoration to Christian hands.

Shah Abbas pledged to the Spanish King that, once they vanquished their common enemy, they would jointly govern the world in tranquility through their alliance. In the concluding remarks of the letter, the Shah implored the King's formidable authority to confront this "dog" ("*questo cane*"), alluding to the Turkish adversary, "whose influence would only grow if left unchecked."³⁹ In employing the metaphorical term 'dog,' Shah Abbas unmistakably referenced the Ottoman Sultan.

To emphasize his stance against the Ottomans, Shah Abbas complemented his letter to Philip III with a selection of gifts, including depictions of Ismael and Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576), alongside his own opulent portrait adorned with precious gemstones and pearls. As documented, a copy of which is housed in the State Archive of Florence, he also presented four live dogs of varying colors

(figure 6). These gifts, while intriguing, serve as a manifestation of his proposal. The metaphorical use of dogs in his letter to refer to the Ottomans finds a curious parallel in the actual gift of live dogs. This practice of referring to the Ottomans as 'dogs' was not uncommon in historical discourse. Pope Sixtus IV's 1471 encyclical letter to his nuncios, for instance, speaks of an anti-Turkish legation established to unite Christendom against the Ottoman threat. The Ottomans were described as "followers of the impious dog Mohammed [Mehmed II]," emphasizing their perceived antagonism to the Christian faith (Setton 1976, 315).⁴⁰ Given the historical context, where referring to the enemy as 'dogs' was a common insult not necessarily directed at Ottoman functionaries, and considering that hunting animals were frequently given as royal gifts, the depiction of dogs in this context serves as another example of such symbolic gestures.

In Caliarì's painting, both dogs are securely under control. The one in the lower-left corner of the composition faces outward and stands meekly with its leash grabbed by the Persian *paggio*. The other one, with a golden leash-chain, has turned his head towards the Venetian who is holding him back, right next to the scene with the glimmering gift of silk that has caught the attention of the Venetians in the painting and its viewers. Within the context of the 'secret' negotiations concerning the military aid the Republic might extend to the Safavid Persians in their forthcoming conflicts against the Ottomans, I interpret the depiction of the two dogs as dual references, symbolizing both royal stature and subtly alluding to the presence of the enemy underlying the embassy's purpose. This interpretation

subtly underscores the anti-Ottoman essence of the Persian mission in Venice. While the Republic refrained from overt military involvement against the Ottomans, its alliance with the Persians conveyed a tacit warning against the Sublime Porte's expansionist endeavors.

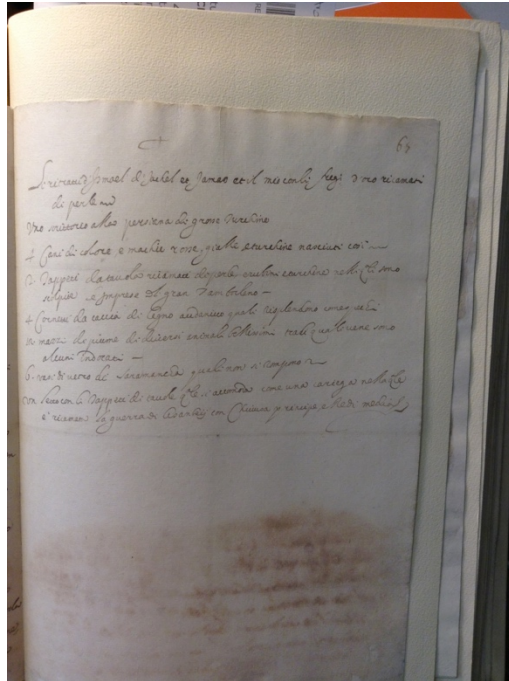


Figure 6
Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Carte Strozziene,
Prima Serie, fol. 65. Record of Shah Abbas's
gifts to Philip III.

In conclusion, Caliari's painting provides dual layers of documentation regarding the Safavid mission of 1603 in Venice. Firstly, it serves as a visual record, albeit with a Veneto-centric bias, immortalizing the opulent gifts bestowed by the Safavids upon the *Serenissima* while downplaying the military motives of the mission. This portrayal favors the cultural and political hierarchies in favor of the Republic. Secondly, the painting strategically reshapes the historical narrative

perceived by the Venetian dignitaries as they traversed the *Sala delle Quattro Porte* before entering the four chambers.⁴¹ It does so by accentuating Persian gifts and figures to enhance the prestige of the *Serenissima*. Nevertheless, this representation significantly underestimates the role of these gifts as dynamic agents in the cross-confessional interactions between the Safavid Empire and the Republic of Venice, particularly in the context of their opposition to the Ottoman Empire.

Shah Abbas's gift of luxurious gold-embroidered velvet, featuring the image of Mary and Christ presented to the Church of San Marco, among others, represents a meticulously crafted overture. This gesture not only highlighted Persian artistic excellence but also signaled cultural recognition, strategically designed to allure the Venetian Republic into a cross-confessional alliance. The gifts from the Safavid court, distinguished by their sumptuous materials and intricate designs, were emblematic of the dynasty's opulence and a testament to their intent to cultivate Venetian trust. These offerings, particularly Shah Abbas's *Madonna del Latte* velvet, were not only lavish but deliberately adorned with Christian iconography, showcasing the Shah's deep understanding of Venetian religious sensibilities. Despite this, Caliari's portrayal tends to obscure these layered historical and cultural significances, instead emphasizing the grandeur of Venice.

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² In addition to the archival resources in endnote 1, see Elisa Gagliardi Mangilli, Ciampiero Bellingeri, and Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, eds. *I doni di Shah Abbas il Grande alla Serenissima: relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia Safavide* [mostra ; Venezia, Palazzo Ducale, 28 settembre 2013 – 12 gennaio 2014], Venezia: Marsilio, 2013; Sinem Arcak Casale, "The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle," *Art History* 38, no. 4 (September 2015): 636-51; Guglielmo Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, Turin, 1865, 43-6, 192-7; and Giorgio Rota, *Under Two Lions: On the Knowledge of Persia in the Republic of Venice* (ca. 1450-1797), Vienna, 2009, 19.

³ For the list of gifts in Persian transcripts in *Nasta'liq* font, see Venezia, ASV, Collegio, Esposizioni principi, *filza* 14r-14v. For other copies, see ASV, *Esp. Principi*. (Traduzione della

Nota del presente del re di Persia, bollata con il suo proprio bollo): "...Un manto tessuto d'oro, Un tappeto di velluto tessuto con oro et argento, Un panno di velluto tessuto in oro con figure di Cristo et di sua madre Maria, Tre cavezzi tessuti in oro, Tre schietti tessuti con seta." Also ASV, *Secreta Commemoriali*, *registro* 26, fols. 179b-180a. For published works on this document, see Rota, "Safavid Envoys in Venice," Appendix 4 and 5, and Plate 1 and 2. For the publication of the list in a secondary source, see Berchet, *Venezia e la Persia*, 198.

⁴ ASV, *Secreta, Commemoriali*, *registro* 26, fols. 180^o-180b.

⁵ "... Un Manto tessuto d'oro, Un Tapeto di seta, et d'oro à Figure di braza 7, Un Panno di seta, et d'oro à Figure di braza 7, Tre Vesti di seta, et d'oro à Figure, Tre altre Vesti di tela di seta senza oro à figure..." ASV, *Secreta, Commemoriali*, *registro* 26, fols. 179b-180a.

⁶ "... Un Panno di seta, et d'oro à Figure longo braza sette, in circa, con quattordici figure..."

ASV, Secreta, Commemoriali, *registro* 26, fols. 180a–180b.

⁷ For more information on the British East Indian Company, see Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*. (London: University of Chicago, 1974).

⁸ For the most recent study on Safavid gifts of velvet to Venice, see Casale S.A. “The Persian Madonna and Child: Commodified Gifts between Diplomacy and Armed Struggle.” *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015): 637–651.

⁹ Venezia, ASVe, *Collegio. Esposizioni Principi*, Registro 14.

¹⁰ Venezia, ASV, *Libro cerimoniali*. Arch. gen.

¹¹ A fragment of this silk is now at the *Museo di Palazzo Mocenigo* in Venice.

¹² In the context of Islamic religious paintings, the depiction of a fiery halo serves as a significant pictorial motif, see Oleg Grabar, “The Story of Portraits of the Prophet Muhammad,” *Studia Islamica* 96 (2003): 19–38; Christiane Gruber, “Between Logos (Kalima) And Light (Nūr): Representations Of The Prophet Muhammad In Islamic Painting,” *Muqarnas Online* 26, no. 1 (2009): 229–62.

¹³ Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, 1865, 46; Gallo, *Il tesoro di S. Marco e la sua storia*, 261.

¹⁴ Qur’an, verse 23–25, chapter 19 (sūrat Maryam): فَأَجَاءَهَا الْمَخَاضُ إِلَى جِذْعِ النَّخْلَةِ قَالَتْ يَا لَيْتَنِي مARYAM: ﴿٢٣﴾ فَنَادَاهَا مِنْ تَحْتِهَا أَلَا مِثْقَلُ ذَرَّةٍ هَذَا وَكَانَتْ نَسِيًا مَنسِيًّا ﴿٢٤﴾ تَحْزَنِي قَدْ جَعَلَ رَبُّكِ تَحْتَكِ سَرِيًّا ﴿٢٥﴾ وَهَرِي إِلَيْكَ بِجِذْعِ النَّخْلَةِ تُسَاقِطُ عَلَيْكَ رَطْبًا جَنِيًّا ﴿٢٥﴾
For English translations see Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Koran: An English Interpretation of the Holy Quran with Full Arabic Text*. (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1992), Sūrat Maryam.

¹⁵ “E questo, disse il persiano, il re manda perchè sia presentato alla chiesa di S. Marco,” Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, 1865, 45–46.

¹⁶ “Questo, disse il persiano, è dei più belli tappeti che si facciano. Il mio re avendo inteso che ogni anno si mette fuori il tesoro di S. Marco, tanto famoso per tutto il mondo, lo manda alla

Serenità Vostra, perchè si contenti ordinare che ogni [46] volta che si esporrà il tesoro sia esso esposto sopra questo tappeto per la sua gran bellezza,” Berchet, 46.

¹⁷ The Portuguese appeared in the southern port-city of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf in early-sixteenth century. By 1515, the Portuguese fully occupied Hormuz to use as a vassal for their trade from Europe to India. See John M. Flannery, *The Mission of the Portuguese Augustinians to Persia and beyond (1602-1747)*, Studies in Christian Mission, Volume 43 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013); Carlos Alonso, “El P. Simón de Moraes, Pionero de Las Misiones Agustinas En Persia,” *Analecta Augustiniana* 62 (1979): 343–72; Carla Alferes Pinto, 150–53.

¹⁸ This gift of the Shah to the Dominican friar is indeed another enlightening subject of study. However, because my focus in this study is on the gifts in Italian collections, I will leave this gift for future research.

¹⁹ See Flannery, *The Mission of the Portuguese Augustinians to Persia and beyond (1602–1747)* for more information.

²⁰ For further art historical evidence, see Noel William and Daniel H Weiss, *The Book of Kings: Art War and the Morgan Library's Medieval Picture Bible*, London and Baltimore: Third Millennium Pub; Walters Art Museum 2002. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by Antique Collectors Club.

²¹ Īraj Afšār, “FĀL-NĀMA,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, IX/2, pp. 172–176. This article is also available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/fal-nama>.

²² For comparative literature, see Casale, “The Persian Madonna and Child,” pp.644–45.

²³ For Persian painting and its visual modes, Cfr. Oleg Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Painting* (Princeton, N.J. and Chichester: Princeton University Press, 2002); Sheila R Canby, *Persian Masters: Five Centuries of Paintings* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1990).

²⁴ The principal point of division between the Twelver Imami Shi’is and orthodox Sunnis is based on their conviction about the legitimate successors of Prophet Muhammad. The Twelver

Shi'is believe 'Ali ibn Abi Taleb, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, and his descendants are the only legitimate successors of the prophet. The Twelver Shi'a rejects the Sunni tradition of the three "Rightly Guided Caliphs" (Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan) leadership after Muhammad. For an introduction to Twelver Shi'a principals, Cfr. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Shi'ite doctrine," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, July 20, 2005; for Safavid sentiments towards Sunnis, Cfr. Rosemary Stanfield Johnson, "Sunni Survival in Safavid Iran: Anti-Sunni Activities during the Reign of Tahmasp I," *Iranian Studies* 27, no. 1–4 (1994): 123–33; Palmira Brummett, "The Myth of Shah Ismail Safavi: Political Rhetoric and Divine Kingship," in *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Victor Tolan (New York: Garland Press, 1996), 331–59; for Twelver Imami Shi'ism in Safavid Persia, Cfr. Rula Jurdi Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: Tauris, 2015) and Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, no. 17 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²⁵ In Ottoman literature, the Ottoman court or government is called The Sublime Porte or the Porte, which is the translation of the Turkish/Arabic word "Bâb-e âli" (the Gate of Eminence).

²⁶ Sala delle Quattro Porte (hall of the Four Doors) in the Doge's Palace of Venice served as a waiting room to the four chambers where pivotal governmental proceedings unfolded within the Venetian Republic. Operating as an oligarchy, the governance of Venice was vested in its noble families and patricians, who traversed through the antechamber before accessing the quartet of chambers dedicated to the College, the Senate, the Council of Ten, and the Chancellery. For more information on Venetian Oligarchy, see McClellan, George B., and Shapiro Bruce Rogers Collection (Library of Congress). 1904. *The Oligarchy of Venice: An Essay*. Boston, [Mass.]: Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

²⁷ Cristelle Baskins believes that the figure who is reading the letter to the Doge is Dragoman

Nores. See Cristelle Baskins, "Framing Khoja Sefer in the Sala Regia of the Quirinal Palace in Rome (1610–1617)," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 24 (2015): 16. For the role of Armenians in Safavid Persia, Cfr. Savory, *Iran under the Safavids*, 1–26, 174–75, 198.

²⁸ Official Safavid costumes were also recorded in the 18th-century drawings of the Venetian artist Giovanni Grevembroch in a volum, *Gli abiti de Veneziani di quasi ogni età con diligenza raccolti e dipinti nel secolo XVIII*, Venezia, now preserved in the Museo Correr, Biblioteca, Ms. Gradenigo Dolfin 49, vol. II, tav. 122

²⁹ The Muslim Persians had their turbans on throughout all official ceremonies, because wearing a turban was (and still is) a *Sunnah Mu'akkadah* (السنة المؤكدة), meaning practices emphasized by the Prophet Muhammad and refusal to observe those prohibits the Muslim devotees from reaching perfection.

³⁰ Among other paintings of the *Sala delle Quattro Porte* at the time of Caliar's painting were: Vicellio Tiziano's (1490–1576) painting of *Doge Antonio Grimani (1436–1523) Kneeling Before Faith* and Jacopo Tintoretto (1517–1594) decorative scheme from 1578 onwards. Cfr. Fantelli, Pier Luigi. "La sala delle Quattro Porte." *Quaderni della Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Storici di Venezia / Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali*, 1979, 81–82; "Il 'Paradiso' del Tintoretto torna a Palazzo Ducale a Venezia." *Amici dei musei / Federazione Italiana delle Associazioni degli Amici dei Musei*, 1985.

³¹ "Questo, disse il persiano, il mio re ha fatto fabbricare apposta per la Serenità Vostra, ed è tutto di un pezzo senza cucitura, e lo manda a Lei in particolare, acciocchè si contenti per amor suo ed in memoria di S. M. portarlo Ella stessa in dosso. Ne ha fatto fare un altro simile a questo, e lo ha mandato a presentare al re di Mogol suo grande amico," Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, 1865, 46.

³² Guglielmo Berchet, *La repubblica di Venezia e la Persia* (Tehran: Imperial Organization for Social Services, 1976). DOCUMENTO XXXV.

³³ In addition to all the noted items, Fathi Beg returned to Persia with eight oil paintings with religious and secular subject matters, including

the Nativity, naked female portraits, and a portrait of the Queen of Cyprus. The Queen was Caterina Cornaro (r.1473–1489), daughter of Emperor John IV of Trebizond and Despina Khatun's sister, who was married to the Venetian aristocrat, Nicolò Crispo. She was second cousin thrice removed of Shāh Abbās. For a complete list of gifts see Simpson, "The Morgan Bible and the Giving of Religious Gifts between Iran and Europe/Europe and Iran during the Reign of Shah 'Abbas I," 147. Rota, "Safavid Envoys in Venice," 233, no. 57.

³⁴ "un bacile con ramino d'argento dorato a figure, ed uno simile di argento puro, un catino d'argento con oro e brocca simile, due fiaschi d'argento intagliati col vetro, un'armatura completa, due zacchi forniti l'uno verde in oro, l'altro rosso, e quattro archibugi lavorati in radice con perle e oro" see Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, 1865, 47.

³⁵ For the development of Safavid trade with Europe, Cfr. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran*; Matthee, "Between Venice and Surat: The Trade in Gold in Late Safavid Iran"; Matthee, "Anti-Ottoman Politics and Transit Rights: The Seventeenth-Century Trade in Silk between Safavid Iran and Muscovy"; Ranjbar and Manesh, "New Routes to Iran's International Trade in the Safavid Era."

³⁶ From a comparable standpoint, see Berchet, *La Repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, 1865, 47; for an opposing argument see Wolfgang Wolters, *Der Bilderschmuck des Dogenpalastes: Untersuchungen zur Selbstdarstellung der Republik Venedig im 16. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983), 228.

³⁷ "...forse la fedeltà" see Tonini, "I doni degli ambasciatori Persiani alla Serenissima nella tela di Gabriele Calvi," 29.

³⁸ Firenze, ASV. *Carte Strozzi* serie 1, no. 15 (Copia di una lettera che scrive il Re di Persia al Re di Spagna tradotto di lingua armenia in spagnola e poi in italiana).

³⁹ "...Mostra signore la tua gran possanza contro a questo cane che ce magneria il core se potesse." Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF). *Carte Strozzi* serie 1, no. 15. My sincere thanks to Dr. Maurizio Arfaio from the Medici Archive Project, who generously helped me with translation and transcription of the letters.

⁴⁰ The letter is archived in Rome, Acta Consistorialia, in *Arch. Segr. Vaticano, Arm. XXXI*, tom. 52, fol. 77r.

⁴¹ The governance structure of the Venetian Republic was notably divided into three distinct classes: Patricians (nobles), Cittadini (citizens), and Popolani (common people), each playing a role in the bureaucratic system that sustained the state's power. Together, these three classes formed a hierarchical but interdependent system that defined the oligarchic nature of Venetian governance, maintaining a balance between aristocratic privilege and a meritocratic bureaucracy essential for the republic's economic and political influence in the Mediterranean and beyond. For more information on the hierarchies in venetian society, see "A Note on the Venetian Social Class System and venetian Geography", *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (New York, 2006; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 May 2008); Monika Schmitter. "Virtuous Riches: The Bricolage of Cittadini Identities in Early-Sixteenth-Century Venice." *Renaissance Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2004): 908–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4143570>.