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**The Arjangi Dynasty of Painters and Tbilisi**

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**Abstract**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became a custom among educated and wealthy Iranians to send their children abroad to study European languages, professions and life style. Those for whom the big cities of Europe were geographically and especially financially inaccessible came to the nearest city of the Russian Empire - Tbilisi, and received education in private boarding schools and colleges. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, for Iranian artists, especially from Tabriz (Azerbaijan, Iran), Tbilisi was the closest city where they could get acquainted and master the methods and techniques of European academic painting. At that time, a number of artistic societies

and private or public art schools operated in Tbilisi. Around 1900, three members of the Arjangi family from Tabriz, who are considered outstanding representatives of modern Iranian painting, received an artistic education in Tbilisi: Seyd Ebrahim Aqa Mir and his sons, Seyd Hosayn Mir Mosavar Arjangi and Seyd Abbas Rassam Arjangi.

**Keywords:** Tbilisi; Tabriz; Tbilisi Art School; Seyd Ebrahim Aqa Mir; Seyd Hosayn Mir Mosavar Arjangi; Seyd Abbas Rassam Arjangi.

### **Introduction**

In the long history of relations between Georgia and Iran, the nineteenth century is referred to as "the last of the Thousand-and-One Tales of the East." During this period, Iran not only lost control of Georgia but also its traditional dominance over the entire Eastern Caucasus. Weakened by prolonged warfare and unfavourable treaties, Iran had to resume diplomatic negotiations with the Russian Empire. The centre of power shifted northward, with Tbilisi becoming the seat of the Russian Viceroy of the Caucasus.

The Iranian community in Tbilisi was notably large, a result of Tbilisi's regional significance on the one hand and the challenging social and economic conditions in Iran on the other, which drove many Iranians to seek opportunities abroad. Tbilisi served as a gateway to the West for many Iranians, who arrived seeking livelihoods, pursuing education, or traveling.

### **Methodology**

The research utilized the comparative study and analysis of Persian and European written sources within a broad historical context, a method widely employed in global historiography.

### **Outcome**

The research identified a significant group of Iranians who travelled to Tbilisi to pursue Western education and study European art.

Among them, four generations of artists from the Arjangi family emerged as particularly successful and renowned.

### **Discussion**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became a custom among educated and wealthy Persians to send their children abroad to study European languages, professions and lifestyle. Those for whom the big cities of Europe were geographically and especially financially inaccessible came to the nearest city of the Russian Empire - Tbilisi, and received education in private boarding schools and colleges.

Iranians would come to Tbilisi to learn those “European professions” that could not be mastered in Iran. One such job was typography. It is known that in 1821 Iranian Crown Prince Abbas Mirza sent the artist Alahverdi to Tbilisi to study lithography techniques (Ter-Oganov, 2000:402). In 1859, the Iranian traveller Haj Sayyah during his stay in Tbilisi regularly visited the printing house of a certain Hambartsoom, where he studied typesetting (Alexidze, 2008:6-13).

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, for Iranian artists, especially those from Tabriz (Azerbaijan, Iran), Tbilisi was the closest city where they could get acquainted and master the methods and techniques of European academic painting. At that time, several artistic societies and private or public art schools operated in Tbilisi. Around 1900, three members of the Arjangi family from Tabriz, who are considered outstanding representatives of modern Iranian painting, received an artistic education in Tbilisi: Sayyid Ebrahim Aqa Mir and his sons, Sayyid Hosayn and Sayyid Abbas. In the 1920s, when following the Western standards Iran introduced surnames, the brothers took Arjangi as the family name, after the title of the book of Prophet Mani, which is considered a symbol of art in the East because of its numerous colourful illustrations. So, Sayyid Abbas became Abbas Rassam Arjangi, and his brother Sayyid Hosayn went by the name Hosayn Mir Mosavar Arjangi. Rassam, the middle name of Abbas, also means painter.

The collection of Oriental art of the Georgian National Museum keeps a number of works created by artists from the Arjangi family. According to Abbas Rassam's memoirs, at least two works of his father, Seyd Ebrahim were in the collection of the Caucasian Museum (the precursor of the Georgian National Museum) already in the early twentieth century (Arjangi, 2019:30). Abbas Rassam saw them when he was working in the museum being invited by its director to restore damaged works of Iranian artists. At present, the Oriental collection of the museum also possesses several works of Abbas Rassam Arjangi himself. They have been inventoried and studied by Grigol Beradze (Beradze, 2014, 2018, 2020).

Ebrahim Aqa belonged to an old and respected family, representatives of which considered themselves *Sayyids*, i. e. direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad. Abbas Rassam describes his father in his memoirs as a versatilely educated man, a poet, calligrapher and rhetorician; he especially loved history and literature, and was well acquainted with the works of French and Russian writers (Arjangi, 2019:24). But his main passion was art. He came to Tbilisi in the 1880s for professional art education, as there was no such opportunity in Iran at that time (Arjangi, 2019:24). He entered one of the art schools, most likely the private school of Keppen, which was subordinate to the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. This allowed its best students to continue their studies at the Academy. Apparently, during his studies in Tbilisi, Ebrahim Aqa showed himself well, because immediately after graduation he was sent to Saint Petersburg where he stayed until the 1890s. He returned to his homeland already a recognized artist and became the court painter of Crown Prince Mozaffar ad-Din Mirza. Ebrahim Aqa's sons, the elder Hosayn and the younger Abbas followed their father's example and came to Tbilisi to study art – the former in 1901 and the latter in 1911, already after the death of his father.

Abbas Rassam Arjangi spent four years in Tbilisi, from 1911 to 1914. At that time, there were several art institutions and orga-

nizations in the city. The first Artistic Society was established in 1873 followed by the foundation of a first primary art school in 1874. In 1877, this society merged with the Musical Society to form the Society for the Promotion of Fine Arts in the Caucasus, which in 1901 opened a secondary educational institution – the School for Painting and Sculpture. It was under the patronage of the Saint Petersburg Imperial School of Arts. The school functioned in a building (present Tbilisi State Academy of Art) known as Arshakuni Palace after the name of its first owner. Judging from the description given in his memoirs, Abbas Rassam Arjangi studied in this school. During the period of his schooling, the headmaster was the well-known artist Oscar Schmerling, and the teaching staff of the school included Henryk Hryniewski, Boris Vogel, and Mose Toidze. Among the schoolmates of Abbas Rassam there should be eminent Georgian painters Lado Gudiashvili (studied from 1910 to 1914) and Ketevan Maghalashvili (studied from 1911 to 1914).

After Tbilisi, Abbas Rassam Arjangi continued his studies in Moscow and returned home in 1917. He worked first in Tabriz and then in Tehran as a painter, calligrapher, and sculpturer. Also, he wrote poems and plays. In the beginning, he tried to get a job in the Ministry of Culture, but he had no luck. A reputable master Kamal al-Molk rejected his works without even looking at them. Abbas Rassam had to open his gallery named Gallery Arjangi. Located on the central street of Tehran, Ala al-Dawla Avenue (present Ferdowsi Avenue), it became the place of meeting of the local artistic elite. Here he organized his first personal exhibition in 1928. Two years later he participated in an international exhibition in Antwerp and was awarded a gold medal and a special diploma.

Abbas Rassam Arjangi died in 1975 leaving behind almost 2000 works. He is believed to be one of the most important Iranian artists of the first half of the twentieth century. Contemporaries wrote that he „mastered the techniques of oil painting, watercolours and graphics to perfection and was incomparable in mixing and combining colours”

(‘Ali Mo’ayeri, 2011:293). His pictures and drawings are preserved in many galleries in and outside Iran and among them in Georgian National Museum.

To give a complete impression of the Arjangi dynasty of artists, mention should also be made of the descendants of Abbas Rassam. His elder son Homa Arjangi is a well-known musician and painter, and the younger son Farhad Arjangi is a writer and painter. Of his six daughters, one is a calligrapher, one is a poet, and two are artists. Abbas Rassam’s grandson Farastu Ganjevi is also an artist (Jamshidi, 2012: 343-361).

Along with pictures and drawings, Abbas Rassam’s legacy includes three volumes of poems and a book of memoirs entitled *The Diary of Recollections*, which was first published in 2012, 37 years after the author’s death, and republished in 2019. It is an autobiographical story which mainly concentrates on the personality of the author and his inner world rather than on events and histories around him. A part of the book dealing with his life in Tbilisi focuses on two aspects. The first is Abbas Rassam’s schooling and his professional advance. The second topic to which the author pays particular attention is the life of Iranians in Tbilisi, both residents and temporary visitors, and the social and political activity of Iranian revolutionary groups.

In the memoirs, the author describes his life in Tbilisi, both important events and everyday life. He describes his relations with the local population and Iranians, classmates and teachers; he talks about his first love and related experiences, his arrest and imprisonment in prison, and his escape from prison. The author's narcissistic self-admiration and his desire to impress the reader are strongly felt in the text.

A reader who is preoccupied with the early twentieth-century history of Tbilisi can find interesting facts about art education in the city. Abbas Rassam Arjangi recounts many details about the school for Painting and Sculpture, which he refers to as *Honarestan-e naqashi*, i. e. the school of arts. The school curriculum was six years long. Classes at the school were five days a week, in two shifts. From 9 a.m. to 12

a.m., students learned painting techniques, and in the evening, from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m., they practised drawing with special charcoal. The school provided the students with everything they needed for their studies. Once in six months, the school organized an exhibition of the best works of its students. Up to three hundred students attended the school and the most successful of them were sent to Russia to continue education.

Apparently, Abbas Rassam Arjangi's years of study in Tbilisi were successful for him professionally. According to him, he soon earned the status of the best student in the school and not only managed to sell his works, but even found regular clients. On the recommendation of the school director, in parallel with his studies, he worked as a restorer of damaged works by Iranian artists kept in the Caucasian Museum.

As noted above, the second major issue discussed in the memoirs is the life and activity of Iranians in Tbilisi. Abbas Rassam Arjangi bitterly notes that locals, especially Russians, have a low opinion of Iranians and view them with disdain if not hostility. In his opinion, this is due to the poor situation of Iranians and their "humiliating" occupations, among which the author mentions selling socks and kerosene on the streets. It should be noted that Abbas Rassam Arjangi is not the only Iranian author who was worried about the deplorable situation of his compatriots in the Caucasus and Tbilisi in particular. Other authors, such as, for instance, Zein al-Abedin Maraghai described the cheerless life of Iranians in even more gloomy tones (Maraghai, 1978: 25). Abbas Rassam Arjangi illustrates the arrogant attitude of Russians toward Iranians with the words of a professor from St. Petersburg who gave him a formula for the professional success of a young Iranian in the Russian Empire: to forget all feelings towards his native country as even good artists are starving to death there; to marry only a Russian woman; to quit smoking and drinking alcohol; and to change the surname so that it sound Russian. The professor promised that in retu-

rn he could receive a monthly stipend and continue his studies in the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg.

Perhaps even more than the arrogance of the Russians, Abbas Rassam Arjangi was annoyed by the bad attitude towards Iranians on the part of local Muslims. At that time, pan-Turkic sentiments were strong among Turkic-speaking Muslims in the South Caucasus, including Tbilisi, due to the rise of Azerbaijani nationalism, which had obvious anti-Iranian overtones. Abbas Rassam Arjangi, apparently not particularly versed in the subtleties of geopolitics, wrote that “both Russians and local Ottomans (meaning Turkic-speaking Muslims - M. A.) are constantly conducting propaganda against Iran. This is because the Ottomans want to conquer the entire Caucasus, and the Russians are afraid that the Caucasus will again become subordinate to Iran” (Arjangi, 2019:26). It is unlikely that on the eve of World War I, anyone in the Russian Empire was seriously worried about the return of Iranian dominance in the Caucasus, but this is a typical early twentieth-century Iranian view of the world in which Iran is still perceived as a great power that inspires fear and respect in its neighbours.

In his memoirs, Abbas Rassam Arjangi presents himself as a certain leader of Iranians living in Tbilisi. According to him, he managed to gather young people of Iranian origin around him, awakening pride in their country by talking about its glorious past. They also discussed the sorrowful current state of Iran and the benefits of the constitutional revolution. In the end, these gatherings culminated in the founding of the “Iran Lovers Group”.

According to Abbas Rassam Arjangi, in 1916, when he returned to Tbilisi from Russia, the situation of the Iranians was even worse than it had been a few years earlier; however, he exaggerates when saying that groups of Iranians were arrested on the streets of Tbilisi and subsequently shot without trial “just for being Iranians”. Abbas Rassam Arjangi himself did not escape reprisals, but the death penalty did not come. He was arrested in his hotel room. No evidence was



found against him, as he had managed to hide a notebook with his anti-tsarist poems, but he was taken away and imprisoned anyway. Abbas Rassam Arjangi was rescued from captivity by fellow members of the “Iran Lovers Group.” They found his cell, cut the bars, rescued him and sent him by train to Julfa. It is hard to say how true this story is, but it gives the memories a vivid adventure flavour.

Abbas Rassam Arjangi talks little about Tbilisi itself and its attractions and sights. He mentions Mushtaid Garden and tells the story of its founder, the mujtahid Mir-Fattah with a bias expected and understandable from a native of Tabriz. He also mentions the railway up Mount Mtatsminda which he refers to as Sheikh Sana’an’s Mount meaning the character of the popular Medieval legend who fell in love with a Christian maiden. It is known that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the local version of this history was developed in Tbilisi. According to this version, events took place in Georgia, the Christian maiden was Georgian, the Sheikh died in Tbilisi and was buried in the yard of St David Church, on the slope of Mount Mtatsminda.<sup>81</sup> The memoirs of Abbas Rassam Arjangi testify that the Iranians in his entourage knew this story well. One of them, having fallen in love with a Georgian Christian woman, says: “And how am I less than the sheikh?”

It must be said that Abbas Rassam Arjangi was not only a good artist, but also a skilled writer. His *Diary of Recollections* is written in simple, lively language, the narrative is dynamic, full of alternating tragic and humorous passages. In general, it is a fascinating reading. In addition, the book contains important material for researchers interested in various aspects of the history of Tbilisi at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **Conclusion**

The history of the artists from the Arjangi family, and especially of Abbas Rassam, is significant in many respects as a typical example of

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<sup>81</sup> For more about the connection of Sheikh Sana’an with Tbilisi see: Alexidze, 2009: 73-85; Javaher Kalam, 1971, 761-764.

Iranians seeking European education outside Iran and in particular in Tbilisi. It illustrates many aspects of nineteenth-century Iranian culture and life, ideas, perceptions and aspirations of Iranians living in Tbilisi.

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