

The Persian Mirror: Reflections of the Safavid Empire in Early Modern France.
Susan Mokhberi.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. xii + 223 pp. £47.99.

The Persian Mirror examines how the French Crown, court, and intelligentsia understood and interacted with Safavid Persia from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century. Drawing on a fascinating collection of literary, artistic, and historical sources, Mokhberi reveals how Safavid Persia served as foil for contemporary French concerns about the French monarchy, politics, devotion, and culture. Mokhberi deploys impressive methodological flexibility as she analyzes sources that reported on, commented on, praised, or scorned Safavid Persia and its rulers: travel literature, French-inflected editions of Persian folklore, diplomatic memoirs, eyewitness accounts of Persian diplomatic missions to France, salon paintings, popular prints, and early journalistic texts. Taken as a whole, *The Persian Mirror* can be read as a kind of extended preface to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. That Enlightenment text, in which a fictitious Persian envoy offers perceptive comments on French culture and society in a series of diplomatic letters home, is well known; less so is the story of how France came to know and admire Persia in such a way that the fiction of a wise Persian observer of French affairs could actually work as a literary conceit. It is this story that Mokhberi lays out here.

The Safavids provided a compelling contrast to other Islamic polities as early modern European observers perceived them: Persia was far enough away not to be a military threat; the Persian shah was (allegedly) more cultured and civilized than the barbarous Turk; his dynasty and court were founded on an ancient legacy of imperial rule, one that might date as far back as Darius or Alexander; and he and his followers were (allegedly) sympathetic to Christians or even inclined to become Christian themselves. In all, European observers found in Persia a positive model of Muslim statecraft, one no less fanciful than the negative images they conjured of Turks or Moors, and one equally keyed to their own priorities, prejudices, and concerns—but a positive one, nonetheless.

Mokhberi focuses on how these images played out in the peculiar political and religious currents of early modern France. During the Wars of Religion, conservative French Catholics saw in Persia a crypto-Christian ally against the infidel Turk. French diplomats on missions to the Safavid capital found their Persian counterparts to be well-informed, rational connoisseurs of new diplomatic protocols. French courtiers at Versailles sought to cast Louis XIV as an imperial figure equal to the great shah. And French consumers eagerly adopted Persian customs (which in practice were just as much Turkish or Arabic), such as drinking coffee, smoking water-pipes, wearing silks, and visiting baths, and then eagerly collected pictorial representations of Persians enjoying the same. Each set of customers found a slightly different Persia—devout, rational, absolutist, or epicurean—to match their own passions and concerns.

Mokhberi's treatment of the *dévots* (devout French Catholics) of the late sixteenth century and their fascination with a crypto-Christian Persia is especially strong; her larger point that the Counter-Reformation saw no one Orientalist way of thinking about the Orient, or even about Persia, is well made. Equally strong is her extended study of the spectacular visit of the Safavid ambassador Mohammad Reza Beg to the French court in 1715, during the last days of Louis XIV. Mokhberi offers a dazzling analysis of the meanings, texts, and subtexts of an early modern diplomatic mission, from its elaborate protocols to the significance of its gift exchanges, speeches, gestures, sights, sounds, and commemorations. Her treatment of this episode is sensitive and well-grounded in the literature of the new diplomatic history, to which these chapters make an important contribution. At the same time, her attention to the popular response to the mission, as recorded in periodical literature, prints, diaries, and other sources provides a rich, added dimension to the account, as we see not just what the Persian embassy did at Versailles but how the visit was read and understood by the broader public.

This is an accomplished study that should be of interest to historians of early modern France and French literature, scholars interested in the long history of Christian-Muslim interactions and exchange, and students of early modern diplomacy.

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Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World. Suzanna Ivanič, Mary Laven, and Andrew Morrall, eds.

Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700 18. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019. 262 pp. + color pls. €109.

Inspired by Caroline Walker Bynum's widely admired work in medieval religious history, contributors to this volume offer a series of well-crafted essays that historicize objects and practices in several religious traditions, for the most part during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Late medieval Christianity's sense of matter produced a metaphysical baseline for early modernity, and sometimes as a parallel in non-Christian settings. Protestants pressed against late medieval ontology while Catholics reasserted it in the post-Tridentine cult of relics, saints, and their devotional imagery. Many contributors to the volume explore even more ways in which matter worked the presence of the divine in the material culture of death, in a broad variety of ex-votos crafted from different materials, and in the medicinal use of amber and semiprecious stones.

The designation "early modernity" commonly implies a Western European and North or South American periodicity, but the editors have produced a wider portrayal