



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Down the (digital) rabbit hole: Mapping and decolonizing Safavid women's imagery in digital museums

Rahbari, L.

DOI

[10.1177/13591835231210438](https://doi.org/10.1177/13591835231210438)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Journal of Material Culture

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rahbari, L. (2023). Down the (digital) rabbit hole: Mapping and decolonizing Safavid women's imagery in digital museums. *Journal of Material Culture*, 28(4), 559-575.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13591835231210438>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Down the (digital) rabbit hole: Mapping and decolonizing Safavid women's imagery in digital museums

Journal of Material Culture
2023, Vol. 28(4) 559–575
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13591835231210438
journals.sagepub.com/home/mcu



Ladan Rahbari 

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

In this article, I trace Safavid paintings depicting women's imagery online and explore the possibility of digitally mapping Safavid (1501–1736) paintings featuring women on publicly accessible platforms. Along with the practice of online mapping that led me to digital museums, I investigated the descriptions presented on three digitized paintings on different platforms to address the questions, “Where and how can Safavid paintings be digitally encountered” and “In light of the theoretical developments in the scholarship on pre-modern discourses of Safavid gender and sexuality, how do the descriptions of Safavid paintings reflect gender discourses online?” By following Safavid paintings of women online and probing the textual descriptions attached to them, and using netnographic research methods to document my experience and encounter with the digitized Safavid paintings, I explore whether the online descriptions accompanying the images could contribute to the making of decolonial knowledge about non-Western gender discourses.

Keywords

decolonial, digital museum, gender, netnography, orientalism, paintings, Safavid

Introduction

Much has been written about Safavid¹ royal women's lives, describing them in different social roles, from concubines and enslaved persons to royal wives and powerful politicians (Gholsorkhi, 1995; Matthee, 2011; Zarinebaf-Shahr, 1998). Enslaved people were often captured during periods of military conflict between the Safavid and other states and territories. There is ample evidence of “Habashi,” “Zangi,” “Indian,” and “Caucasian” enslaved people used for sex and in the military, and enslaved servants in

Corresponding author:

Ladan Rahbari, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Email: l.rahbari@uva.nl

brothels, teahouses, harems, and in the middle and upper-class Iranian families and among pastoral clans from the early 1500s to the beginning of the 20th century (see e.g. Clarence-Smith, 2006; Khosronejad, 2016; Rahbari, 2021).

Nonlocal Safavid authors have obsessed over Safavid women by writing about their beauty and the erotic wonders of the harem, where women lived (among those writing about Safavid women or harem are travelogues, written during the Safavid period (see e.g. Chardin, 1993; Della Valle, 1991; Figueroa, 1984; Grès, 1973; Kaempfer, 1985; Olearius, 2006; Sanson, 1967; Sherley et al., 1983; Tavernier, 2003). These writings, often in the form of travelogues, produced inaccurate or biased information about women's lives under the Safavid reign (Karami et al., 2018). The validity of this literature on the Safavid period is scrutinized by feminist scholars (see for e.g. Babayan, 2008; Najmabadi, 2005; Rahbari, 2009, 2021) as they are mostly written by nonlocal men using sources that are also largely created by men and thus reflecting a predominantly androcentric perspective (Minowa and Witkowski, 2009). The travelogues, often written by Europeans, described the Safavid society with strong colonial undertones. They interpreted what they perceived as the "invisibility" of women in public spaces they frequented as women's complete powerlessness and emphasized women as oversexualized beings that served nothing more than the erotic imagination of men (Simons, 1970).

These biased accounts of gender are not merely matters of past history and continue leaking into spheres of cultural representation today. In this article, I will use Edward Said's notion of Orientalism (Said, 1978) to discuss how contemporary interpretations of historical objects (such as Safavid paintings) could be biased as a result of internalizing Orientalist perspectives. Where Orientalism is a normalized discourse—if not the only existing norm—more efforts are required to demystify the myth of Oriental womanhood. In light of the predominance of Orientalist perspectives, authorized images of non-Western contexts, displayed to a nonexpert and public audience, if left to interpretation, may slip into dominant narratives and discourses of Safavid women as exoticized, beautiful objects of desire. I use the term Oriental/Orient in this article to refer to the colonial imaginaries and inventions of concepts such as gender (Oyěwùmí, 1997) that have characterized Western thinking about the "other" in general and the Safavid in particular.

While Edward Said did not refer to Persian history, his work can be expanded to the Safavid and Persian contexts. Furthermore, important works in the historical study of gender and sexuality in Iran, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards* (Najmabadi, 2005) and Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Afary, 2009) have already shown that representations of gender in premodern/colonial Persian literature and art have the potential to disturb the seemingly self-evident and taken-for-granted binarism of gender in premodern/colonial Iran. Safavid art and literature offer much visual and textual evidence of gender diversity (Rahbari, 2018). In light of the theoretical developments in studying premodern/colonial discourses of gender in Iran, I probe how the descriptions accompanying Safavid paintings reflect on and contextualize gender on digital platforms. In my analysis, I explore how the accessibility of such publicly available historical digitized objects could contribute to decolonial knowledge-making about gender.

This article aims to map Safavid paintings of women online and investigate the descriptions presented on digitized objects on different platforms to explore how objects related to the Safavid period are digitally encountered. Digitization has greatly impacted how objects, specifically historical ones, are accessed and perceived by the general public, especially since access to museum collections has shifted from local and regional availability to online platforms (Hylland, 2017). This changed profoundly with the digitization of objects and their widespread distribution in cyberspace. Openness and accessibility are important for the paper's goal as it aims to think of publicly accessible archives to better foreground how women appear in Safavid paintings. Therefore, I have followed images that were accessible without obstacles, such as mandatory subscriptions or paywalls. Limiting images to those that can be accessed without subscription or paywall has a specific caveat: the search is biased toward publicly funded institutions in the Global North whose mandate and perhaps resources allow for such access. I used the netnographic research method to document my experience and encounter with the digitized Safavid painting. This method allows researchers to capture their online experiences, as an online user would, through observation and reflexive note-taking.

The current article investigates images of women depicted alone and without men in Safavid paintings. I intended to focus on women outside of their (hetero-)relations to men but to include other potential ways that women were portrayed, including in caretaking roles. Therefore, I did not exclude images of women with children and/or animals in their company. I address the questions, "Where and how can Safavid objects be digitally encountered?" and "In light of the theoretical developments in the scholarship on premodern/colonial discourses of Safavid gender and sexuality, how do the descriptions of Safavid paintings reflect gender and sexuality online?" In the following, I will first briefly discuss the presence of Safavid women in paintings. I then present the study background before introducing the three Safavid paintings that I followed. These case studies are (i) *Woman with a spray of flowers* (1595); (ii) *Woman applying henna* (late 16th century); (iii) *A reclining woman and her lapdog* (1640). While case (ii) is a painting, cases (i) and (iii) are detached folio, meaning that they were potentially part of a manuscript once. As a recent publication of the National Museum of World Cultures of the Netherlands by Comstock-Skipp (2019) shows, there is a great difference in how loose pages are analyzed compared to intact manuscripts. Comstock-Skipp (2019) explains that manuscripts and albums were ripped apart to extract visual material and illustrations to be sold separately. Interpretation of items detached from their contexts—such as loose pages of a manuscript—is a challenge that is encountered by museums and scholars alike, and which, as I will discuss in the empirical section, I, too, had to deal with.

Safavid women and their place in (digitized) paintings

Safavid women have, in the literature, been positioned within a strong binary: either as "slaves" to their husbands and serving purely reproductive goals or as educated and strong-willed political agents (for discussion on Safavid women's imagery see e.g. Karami et al., 2018; Rahbari, 2021). The truth is somewhere in between. Some Safavid women, particularly elite women of high society, participated in economic

activities. These women contributed significantly to the rise and success of the Safavid empire by financially supporting one of the most important religious orders (i.e. Shaykh Safi's order) for several centuries (see Zarinebaf-Shahr, 1998: 250). Royal women have specifically been documented to have greatly influenced power dynamics in the royal household by employing their familial bonds and connections to powerful tribes (see for e.g. Birjandifar, 2005; Gholsorkhi, 1995). Royal women also received education (Karami et al., 2018) while there is not much evidence of widespread education of women in society. Sex workers are also documented to have enjoyed some degrees of power and freedom (Rahbari, 2021). There is, however, less known about the Safavid rural and everyday urban women's lives since most local histories and travelogues were drawn into the royal court and cultural hubs in bigger cities, such as Isfahan (Minowa and Witkowski, 2009; Rahbari, 2021).

Besides using local histories, literature, and travelogues written by nonlocal travelers—missionaries, ambassadors, traders, and travel enthusiasts—studies on gender in the Safavid period have also relied on paintings from the period (see for e.g. Babaie, 2009; Ghazanfari and Tabatabaïi, 2017; Minowa and Witkowski, 2009). The paintings reveal details on women's fashion and clothing, life events, and activities, and sometimes visualize cultural traditions. Additionally, they provide us with a visual repertoire to better understand the historical definitions of gender. It is important to note that, while portraits of real individuals during the Safavid period exist, paintings often included images of imaginary and idealized figures representing earthly and divine beauty/love. The symbolic, imagined, and somewhat poetic nature of Safavid paintings, however, does not exclude them from being historically and culturally embedded and produced but is a reminder of caution when analyzing them as representatives of cultural practices of the period. Besides what is depicted, what is not portrayed in paintings is also meaningful. Safavid women of the royal household and elite women would not have been subjected to the gaze of outsiders in paintings, and thus there were women from the royal household with fewer standing who were more often portrayed in the paintings (Landau, 2013). In addition, most paintings and written descriptions are connected to the monarchy and the royal setting. The paintings thus give us a narrow window to view a part of Safavid's royal and high society women's lives and rather idealized, glamorized, and sometimes symbolic aspects of it.

In general, in Persian painting, portraits of men far outnumber women and children (The British Museum, see entry *Woman Carrying Child with Goldfinch*, accessed 25 August 2021). In images that entail both men and women, women are portrayed in diverse but specific roles such as lovers, subjects and objects of lust, spectators of events, dancers, and musicians (albeit less predominantly than men) (Babaie, 2009; Ghazanfari and Tabatabaïi, 2017). Both men and women are eroticized in Safavid paintings (Yaghoobi, 2016), but the depiction of female nudity is not common (Rezaei et al., 2020). Despite their relatively less frequent appearance in paintings, paintings depicting Safavid women are still both abundant and digitally accessible.

Digitized paintings can offer extensive amounts of information to the viewer. This is partly because of the affordances of digital spaces. Affordances shape the actions of socially situated subjects by enabling and constraining their activities (Davis, 2020). Intertextuality acquires a whole new meaning when texts, images, and sounds can be connected easily and quickly through affordances such as hyperlinks. As Barthes has

discussed, intertextuality means that nobody has ultimate authority over the meaning of a text and that there is no singular, ultimate, or stable meaning to be deciphered. As a result, the meaning of each text or discourse is understood only in relation to others (Haberer, 2007). Additionally, digital objects “are often described as being pure information, floating somehow in immaterial space. At the same time, their materiality is, in fact, continually shifting as electrical circuits pass through cables, into hardware, through the interfaces of code, and, at the moment, primarily onto screens” (Geismar, 2018: 18). This shifting materiality and intertextuality of digital objects are important as the objects—in this case, images’—quality, the platform they are being hosted on, the descriptions, and the hyperlinks attached to them, impact, if not shape, the ways images are found, observed, and interpreted.

Images are polysemic and ambiguous, requiring text to disambiguate them (Penn, 2000). The textual descriptions of (digitized) paintings are thus important for interpreting images. For most viewers—whether from a Persianate background or not—paintings of Safavid women are not unproblematically intelligible and do not speak for themselves. The images are so entangled with historiographical and colonial discourses that their denotational and connotational meanings require careful interrogation, description, and contextualization. Whether the viewer of the digitized paintings is familiar with Persian painting or the script makes the experience of encountering artworks online dramatically different. It is perhaps possible to assume that looking for Safavid paintings in a targeted way would not happen unless the user is slightly familiar with Safavid history.

Following Safavid women’s paintings online

This study started with the premise that there is great power and potential in displaying, presenting, and describing historical objects. Open-access digitized paintings of Safavid women and their descriptions in digital spaces, including museums, are perhaps the most accessible public source of learning about women’s lives in Safavid Persia. If one searches on Google Image to search for women in Safavid paintings—the same way I started my research—Google Image presents many Safavid paintings depicting women and additionally (and perhaps unsurprisingly) images that were neither Safavid nor Persian. I also tried the same search words using Bing and DuckDuckGo search engines. The results were not dramatically different in terms of accuracy, but the orders of appearances of items differed. Google uses algorithms that personalize search findings (Yamamoto and Yamamoto, 2020), but my usage of different devices, accounts, and locations did not lead to different results for the image search. Internet searches are, however, subject to change over time. I decided to use Google results for this research as the search results seemed more accurately connected to the search terms.

Using Google and searching for “women in Safavid paintings” over the summer of 2020, the first several images—and many images on this Google Image search page—directed me to a website called Pinterest, which is an image-sharing and social media platform (Perhaps the reader can imitate my search process and experience the encounters firsthand). Pinterest features images chosen by its users (Pinners) who post pictures on their Pinboard. The first painting that led me to Pinterest appeared on their web page, and other similar paintings were suggested to me under this image. Pinterest’s suggested paintings were either from the same period or had similar motifs. Pinterest is, however,

not openly accessible as scrolling down on the pages I was directed to automatically locked the webpage. Pinterest only allows roaming on its platform if the user creates an account. I could not access the “more information” section under the Pin either—Pins are images that a user posts on Pinterest—because I was not logged in with a user account. As open access without paywalls and subscriptions was an important criterion for the research, I retreated from Pinterest to the main Google webpage in search of the next painting that did not lead me to a digital obstacle or a paywall. The second attempt led me to the first image I will discuss in detail, *Woman with a spray of flowers*, and other similar attempts led me to the following two paintings, called *Woman applying henna* and *A reclining woman and her lapdog*.

I then conducted a reverse image search on Google, which revealed that all three images are often used online in an array of ways, such as but not limited to, in personal blogs, poetry, and literature websites, and academic entries and registries about Iran, the Safavid, and Ottoman periods, arts and paintings, Islam and the Middle East as a whole, etc. The web content was in multiple languages and addressed different publics. The reverse image search also showed the frequency of references to these images, and the most popular image on the web among the three was *Woman with a spray of flowers* (414 references), followed by *Woman applying henna* (283 references), and then *A reclining woman and her lapdog* (238 references). The images were often accompanied by texts but not always directly addressed in those texts. They were also used merely as decorative digital objects, sometimes in exoticized ways. The image qualities were also different, as many blogs reproduced the three paintings with reduced quality/size and without descriptions. My search led me to both exclusively digital museums and the digital versions of museums that also exist physically, where the paintings were not merely presented as decorative objects and displayed with extensive and relevant descriptions. In the rest of the article, I will refer to both types of platforms as digital museums.

Painting 1: Woman with a spray of flowers

The first image I clicked on was a *Woman with a spray of flowers* (ca. 1595 Safavid). The image led me to the Wikipedia page of the entry “Safavid dynasty” in which the image was featured as an example of “Safavid dynasty art.” The image was captioned with the name of the painting and the explanation that the image was “housed in the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian, Washington D.C.” This led me to the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art, part of the Smithsonian Institution. Therefore, within the first few minutes of conducting my netnographic research, I had already entered a digital museum. I communicated with the gallery to include a copy of the painting in this chapter. However, the inclusion of the image was conditional on providing information about the volume (such as the title of the publication, publisher’s name, specific usages, total print run, territorial distribution of the publication, etc.) that my article would be a part of (this very volume). Academic publications cannot predict where and how they will eventually appear; hence, I did not have the information at that time either. This was a frustrating outcome as my persistence to obtain permission to include the image remained futile. It is noteworthy that the museum also asked for monetary compensation, but since I did not have all the required information, I was

told that accurate pricing was not possible (see the link to access *Woman with a Spray of Flowers*, accessed 27 August 2021: in the reference list).

Woman with a spray of flowers was part of The Smithsonian's Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery's initiative to release over 40,000 high-resolution images of Asian and American art online in 2015 (Montgomery, accessed 27 August 2021). The image is located within the collection called "Arts of the Islamic World." Despite having been accessible online for six years and being one of the first images that appear online when looking for Safavid Iran, there are very few academic studies to my knowledge that have discussed the content of this painting. The gallery webpage indicated that the painting is in the form of a "(d)etached album folio," making it difficult to locate the context. The description of the painting entails,

(t)he painting is set in gold, green and blue rulings on a paper with floral motifs, marginal cartouches [oval design] with two couplets in white nasta'liq script [A type of Perso-Arabic calligraphy widely used in writing Persian literature and poetry], and two marginal medallions with kneeling youths.

The information the gallery offers us is not limited to the description of the content. There is also a label, which reads:

The verses in the border of this painting seem integral to the composition. They imply the yearning of the lover, represented by the two kneeling youths in the upper and lower corners of the folio, for the beloved.

How long are you going to wound me with grief?
 Keep me wondering in the lane of separation?
 If in the end you will raise me from dust,
 Why do you cast me away like an arrow?

The woman in the painting is wearing elegant clothes, consisting of a blue dress. She is surrounded by branches covered with white flowers/blossoms and holds sprays of the same flowers in both hands. She appears standing in a static position and looks away from the viewer. She is wearing a hat ornated with a feather and a red pendant in the form of a cross hanging from a red chain. During the early Safavid period, the detailed paintings in the *Shahnameh* of Tahmasp—an epic poem written by the Ferdowsi (Persian poet of the 10th–11th century CE)—and other illustrated royal manuscripts provide detailed information about dress codes and preferences (Ulugergerli, 2017). The woman's background is painted blue and is ornated with faint golden flowers. The blue could symbolize many things and states in Iranian painting, including a state of grieving (Marasi, 2016). The grief becomes clearer from the ornated narrations on the sides of the page, which were mentioned in the verses above. The text thus may be aligned with this symbolism of the color blue and the melancholy feeling that the painting produces. It is, however, important to note that while there seems to be a connection between the image and the accompanying verses, a meaningful connection between images and verses does not always have to be present as merely ornamental images and designs in Persian manuscripts were practiced.

The cross-shaped ornament could indicate that the woman is Christian or European. This is my reading of the image, and there is no reference to this interpretation in the description of the painting on the museum's page. Depictions of non-Muslims in Safavid paintings have been mostly associated with Europeans in Safavid paintings, in which, as Roostaie puts it, (r)endering of females, seminude with their breasts or midriffs exposed through sheer clothing—which were unknown until the reign of Shah Abbas I is the most straightforward example of Persians' fascination with Western prototypes (Roostaie, 2017). While there is scholarship on Orientalist ways Safavid are perceived by scholars studying the period, some scholars, such as Tanavoli argue that Safavid visual material challenges assumptions on who sexualizes and mythologizes whom and suggests shifting boundaries of the erotic and the exotic (Tanavoli, 2016). It is impossible to determine the context of this painting with the information provided online, but the existence of similar paintings suggests that Christian women were the subject of artistic representation in the 16th-century Safavid period.

The image itself can provide us with potential insights into Safavid's higher-class women's fashion, but there are limits to the self-evident aspects of the imagery. But considering that the imagery may be idealized and poetic, it is not easy to draw conclusions based upon it about the real-life practices of Safavid women. The information provided by the gallery's website is rather limited. The relationship between the images and the text is—especially in museum settings such as this one, where historical and nonlocal objects are displayed—in Barthes's terms, a “relay relationship,” as both image and text contribute to the process of meaning-making (Penn, 2000). The textual data accompanying the visual one thus provides some information but not enough—as it is customary in museums—to adequately contextualize the readings that one may perceive from observing the painting alone. Therefore, *Woman with a spray of flowers* remains an unknown, ornate Oriental woman, somewhat detached from her context.

Painting 2: Woman applying henna

After analyzing *Woman with a spray of flowers*, I went back to the original Google search page to move on to the next image. The next painting that appeared on the list and did not lead me to Pinterest and other subscription-based platforms was “Woman Applying Henna.” *Woman applying henna* was on display on the Metropolitan Museum of Arts' (The MET) website. The description of this painting, painted in the late sixteenth century, on the museum website was rather detailed and explained,

This painting is a rare depiction of a young woman applying henna to her feet, a ritual associated with rite of passage celebrations, specifically marriage, in Iran and surrounding regions. The subject chosen by this unknown artist reflects the increasing interest of Safavid painters of this period in depictions of everyday people and events. The sitter's right foot rests on a pile of henna leaves, her garments falling back slightly to reveal her gold and gray undergarments. The illustration would have been included in an album of paintings and drawings. (MET website, the entry, *Woman Applying Henna*, accessed 26 August 2021)

This description provides more information on the painting's aesthetics and content and anthropological information on the usage of henna in rites of passage and marriage ceremonies (see the painting on MET website: link in the references accessed 26 August 2021). It is explained that the henna is applied as a part of a rite of passage. However, the fact that the woman is depicted alone may indicate that she uses henna in an individual beauty practice rather than a ceremonial way. This is not far-fetched, as the Safavid literature has shown that henna was one of the most popular cosmetics of the period (Nodehi et al., 2013). The label further clarifies that,

Even though the painting is by an anonymous artist not connected to the Safavid court, it displays a noteworthy awareness of trends current in the work of court artists, such as the heightened interest in depicting commonplace activities and the increase in portraits of individual sitters.

From the detailed label, the viewer understands that while the image of the woman applying henna is rare, it was, in fact, not rare to depict women or individuals engaging in everyday and mundane activities during the Safavid period. There were, however, limitations to the depictions of individual women until the 17th century as women of nobility were less often depicted, and women were often depicted in modest clothing (Rezaei et al., 2020). It is also known that women's visibility and appearance in public gradually reduced from the beginning to the end of the Safavid period (Matthee, 2011). Depicting the seminudity of women was not a common aspect of Safavid paintings. In fact, another entry in the British Museum explains that until the 17th century, bare-breasted women were entirely off-limits except in certain manuscript illustrations. It was Riza-yi' Abbasi—an Iranian painter from Isfahan during the later Safavid period, working for the Safavid court—who introduced the genre of nude or seminude single figure female portraits to Safavid painting (The British Museum, see the entry *Woman Carrying Child with Goldfinch*, accessed 25 August 2021).

The background of this painting is abstract and embellished with vague watercolor flower patterns, and there is no direct indication of time and place. The sides of the page are also ornated with animal and flower patterns in gold and teal. There is a sense of serenity and slowness in *Woman applying henna*, which suits the occasion, as applying patterned henna is a long and accurate process that requires patience and precision. The woman seems to be immersed in the practice and indifferent to her surroundings. Perhaps that is why she is sitting in a way that reveals her undergarments. As the image explained in the catalog entry shows, the woman's long dress has fallen back to reveal the decorative underwear covering her thighs and knees. Despite this, her pose and expression are self-absorbed and not overtly erotic (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, see the entry, *Woman Applying Henna*, accessed 26 August 2021). Another important detail that we learn from the label is regarding the context,

(I)n Iran the dried leaves are mixed with water or rosewater for application to the hands and feet for their color alone (...) The depiction in Safavid paintings of tribal women with intricately patterned henna ornament on their hands and feet suggests that in the sixteenth

century, the difference in taste between urban and rural women extended beyond clothing and headgear.

This section of the label offers us an anthropological window into the life of Safavid women. Applying henna to their hands and feet is presented as a practice by “tribal” women and part of their fashion choices that included clothing, headgear, and other ornaments. *Woman applying henna*, similar to *Woman with a spray of flowers*, wears elegant clothes. The accessories and jewelry look luxurious. Her hair is covered under a hat, but locks of curled hair are visible on the sides of her face. There is a flower shoot coming out of her pink-colored ornated hat. One may conclude from her fashion and accessories that, if this were to represent a real person, the woman would belong to the upper-class urban strata.

There is a script around the image of the woman. The catalog clarifies that this script is part of a poem in *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi and part of the story of *Esfandiyar* (see Encyclopædia Iranica, the entry, A Reclining Woman and Her Lapdog, accessed 26 August 2021). As it is common to see in illustrated historical manuscripts, there is no meaningful connection between the scripts on this page and the painting’s depiction of the woman. The information provided by the museum describes the content of the painting and locates *Woman applying henna* in a place with geographical and temporal specificities. This has rendered her more than a mere digital object. Not only does she have a story to tell and a place in the world, but through her, we also learn about the practice of henna, the fashion choices of urban/rural women, and gendered traditions in painting and art.

Case 3: A reclining woman and her lapdog

Satisfied with the MET display of *Woman applying henna*, I moved on with my search by starting with the same Google search again. The next image I came across was “A reclining woman and her lapdog.” The painting was painted in 1640 by Mir Afzal of Tun, a 17th-century CE Persian painter. The painting is displayed on the British Museum website (see the link in the references accessed 26 August 2021). The description on the Museum’s website explains

Reclining woman; single-page painting mounted on a detached album folio. Portrait of a beautiful woman reclining against cushions, watching her dog drink from a bowl beside. Lady dresses in loose and provocative clothing, revealing her bare stomach and printed pants. A vase of roses stands by her feet, while a bowl and plate lie in front. Faded tree and plant drawings decorate the background. Calligraphy on B side. Border filled with calligraphy. Inscribed above lady’s stomach.

From the description of this painting, we learn that the reclining woman image is different from the *Woman with a spray of flowers* and the *Woman applying henna* in different ways. One point of difference is that the former is intentionally eroticized since depicting seminudity was associated with eroticism during this period. This can be interpreted from the woman’s pose, the seminude chest and belly, the rolled-up skirt that exposes the

undergarments, and the stretched arms and gaze, which contribute to the erotic illustration. In addition, the reclining woman is not wearing a headcover or a hat, and long locks of hair surround her face and body.

The surrounding environment and the painting background are both abstract and realistic. A large blue vase holds flowers, and the less pronounced background is patterned with tree branches and flowers. The reclining woman's *clothes*, including her exposed undergarments, are ornated with flowers, and the textiles entail extensive details. A shoot of white flowers/blossoms emerges from the woman's chest. The flower resembles the single white flower attached to the woman's hat in *Woman applying henna*. The great detail in the textile of the clothing, the finely ornated bowls, the detail in the cushions and the large vase, and the entirety of the image connote a luxurious environment. As there is no elaborate explanation of the potential class or position of the woman in the painting, my curiosity took me back to the web, and I found more explanation by The British Museum on another website. The image's visible luxury and erotic aspects have led the interpreters to believe the depicted woman must have been a sex worker. The British Museum wrote about this painting on the website Smart History,

A woman lies back against cushions, lazily watching her dog drink from her wine bowl. Her relaxed pose and the loosened state of her clothes and hair imply permissiveness, as does the freedom allowed to the lapdog. She is almost certainly a prostitute, and the lavish ceramics, cushions and clothing suggest that she is an expensive one. Many European travelers to Iran in the seventeenth century remarked on the high-class courtesans of Isfahan, and their luxurious lifestyles. (A Reclining Woman and Her Lapdog, accessed 26 August 2021)

The practice of sex work in the Safavid court and in the city of Isfahan during the period has been widely documented. Safavid royals and powerful men benefitted from and supported sex workers, and the sex industry was a tax-paying institution (Rahbari, 2018). The woman being a sex worker is an assumption behind which lies the Orientalist premise that the presence of impurity cannot be accompanied by a practicing Muslim. Drinking alcohol has been shown to have been practiced by elite men in Safavid Iran, but women, as a rule, abstained from drinking alcohol (Matthee, 2014). But since such paintings do not always depict real people but idealized and symbolic figures, it is possible to imagine that the woman was not intended to be perceived as a sex worker but rather a beautiful woman accompanied by earthly/divine pleasures.

A potential link to the Safavid sex work industry is not mentioned on the British Museum's website. What stands out is that the information about her being "almost certainly" a sex worker, which is mentioned on the Smart History website, is left out of the description on The British Museum's webpage where the painting is displayed. Instead, it is explained that,

By the 1630s, Persian artists no longer portrayed 'pin up girls' in the guise of literary figures. Rather, paintings of suggestively posed, scantily clad courtesans increased, a phenomenon attributed to the loose moral climate at the court of Shah Safi (r. 1629–42). Of the artists working at the courts of Shah Safi (1629–42) and Shah Abbas II (1642–66) Mir Afzal Tuni (or Husayni) adhered most closely to the themes and style of his predecessor Riza-yi

Abbasi. A painting of an amorous couple by this artist in Princes, Poets & Paladins (cat. no. 50) reveals his interest in mildly erotic subjects.

This increase in interest in erotic objects may have been affected by the relative sense of freedom in painting Europeanized subjects, of which the reclining woman may be one. The gaze of the reclining woman is toward the dog sipping wine from a large bowl. The oddity in this painting is that the lapdog is drinking from the wine bowl (Babaie, 2009). This is especially interesting that the dog is drinking from the same bowl as the bowl that the human companion uses, as seen in this image. Babaie (2009: 132) explains that in Perso-Islamic culture, lapdogs as pets would be considered unclean to many Muslims and unacceptable in intimate spaces.

Dogs and cats are commonly depicted in Safavid paintings (Grabar and Natif, 2001; Hosseini Rad, 2014) but are not commonly portrayed as pets. The woman's pose, environment, lack of headgear, and the presence of elements such as wine and a dog all support the hypothesis that she is a sex worker. The presence of the "impure" dog, the "impure" wine, the woman's bold pose, and seminudity all point to loose morals, and hence, the potential presence of a non-Muslim courtesan. Babaie (2009: 134) interrogates the interpretations of this painting and, reading the wine-drinking dog as a symbolic presence, conceptualizes *A Reclining woman with a lapdog* as an allusion to the yearnings of an absent European male. Others have taken the presence of dogs as a sign of Europeanizing tradition that entailed portrayals of Iranians alongside European motifs, such as being accompanied by pet dogs (Mathee, 1998). This again indicates that the image could represent an idealized figure of a woman who is not necessarily European or a sex worker.

There is an ornate and busy script around the image of the woman, which is part of a poem written by Nezami Ganjavi, a 12th-century CE prominent Persian poet. The poem is called *Iskandernāme* and is an epic Persian novel on Alexander's life and triumphs. Perhaps there is a connection between Alexander and his company—non-Muslim European men—and the European symbolism around the reclining woman. The museum's description does not discuss the scripts at the image's margins or clarify a meaningful connection between the poem and the image. This is a connection that I also could not make with the information provided by the website and from this one-page album folio. Based on the museum's website information, one perceived that *A reclining woman and her lapdog* is primarily an erotic subject. The Museum's website does not explain the meanings behind the symbolic presence of the dog, the wine, and the potential connotations of the Europeanization of artistic themes.

Decolonial knowledge of Safavid women

I did not start this research aiming to study digital museums, but my search for open access and digitized paintings of Safavid women led me to them as spaces where paintings depicting Safavid women were the subject of attention and inquiry. This small exercise shows the potential that digital museums have to convey information to visitors and disturb some of the common and salient presumptions that their visitors have been exposed to, and contribute to the (re)making of decolonial knowledge about non-Western gender discourses. At the onset of this article, I asked, "Where and how

can Safavid paintings be digitally encountered?" My Google Image search led me to an array of platforms and pages. The digital encounters with Safavid paintings sometimes happened in places where the paintings occupied a marginal state. Mapping women in Safavid paintings on the web did not always lead to information on the paintings and/or Safavid women, as the paintings were often either decorative or were used as "examples" rather than the center of textual information that accompanied them.

I also asked, "How do the descriptions of Safavid paintings reflect gender discourses in digital platforms?" The descriptions of the three paintings on display included information about gender, but the levels of contextualization differed, as the *Woman applying henna* was accompanied by a more detailed description than the other two paintings. One must recognize that the images, even when left alone, can convey entangled webs of meaning (Babaie, 2009: 134). Even when unaccompanied by descriptive text, images and objects found in museums can convey complex meanings. The paintings I discussed in this article offer, at least to the punctilious viewer, information about women's activities, fashion, and gendered embodiment. Women in the images were portrayed carrying out everyday and mundane acts: smelling flowers, leaning on cushions, and applying henna. The images imparted information on clothing, fashion accessories, decorative items, and beauty practices to the viewer and implicitly revealed the potential rules of women's modesty, color and textile preferences, and class differences. Common facial features depicted in the paintings—such as the pronounced unibrow, body size, and shape—exhibited the Safavid idealized female beauty. The women's pose, gaze, ornaments, bodily disposition, and other objects and animals in sight disclosed more than the practices with which they were engaged. They also displayed what would have been considered erotic, fascinating, and slightly in the Safavid Persian context.

While the images speak and exhibit knowledge about Safavid women, without contextualization and historicization, the objects remain foreign and may appear exotic. This is specifically the case when it comes to what, in Global North contexts, is considered Oriental. Like anthropologists/sociologists, romantic novels, and colonial administrations, museums helped construct the skewed image of "The Orient." The museum continues to reflect and reproduce colonial power relations (Gaupp et al., 2020) and are/were sites in which representations of the world—specifically the colonized world—were/are organize(d), essentialized, otherized, and reinvented (Mitchell, 2019). Because of the existing Orientalist discourses, there is now a more pronounced responsibility to tell alternate narratives. The Safavid woman depicted and described in these entries does not necessarily step away from those Orientalist narratives of piety and beauty. This is specifically important because gender discourses in the Safavid period were characterized by a multiplicity of gender and sexualities (Najmabadi and Babayan, 2008; Rahbari, 2018), a message that is not conveyed or hinted at in the museum descriptions to more accurately position womanhood within the Safavid gender diversity.

In the case of the three paintings I visited, the focus was on describing the items' materiality: their shape, colors, and aesthetic specificities. The women in the paintings remained predominantly Oriental: beautiful, distant, and exotic. Orientalism consists of discourses that authoritatively describe and reinvent the Oriental-Muslim people. Within this discourse, the Oriental woman is subject to a gendered discursive power that visualizes and writes about her as she remains the object of a permanent gaze and

constant prying (Mehdid, 1993). Edward Said argued that within Orientalist perspectives, both the exotic and paternalistic model of authoritative reinvention takes place: meaning that subjects of Orientalism are shown as exotic creatures that deserve fascination as well as oppressed people that require direction. Artistic representations of women, such as the three paintings I followed, are often subjected to the former, namely, exoticization.

Displayed objects serve several pedagogic, aesthetic, artistic, anthropological, and historical functions, after all. My intention was not to juxtapose these sets of functions but rather argue that they are connected and one should not be left out at the expense of the other. In addition, museums often cannot offer extensive information on their displayed items in offline exhibits. It is also understandable that they may be unable to attach full-length articles on the history and the context of all digital items on display. Museum labels are commonly rather brief and only aim to offer general descriptions of items. But while they are not themed, and their purpose is not to discuss specific issues, they can offer decolonial content. It may be useful to use hyperlinks to address issues requiring further elaboration when possible and when extensive contextualization is available. Exhibitions, similar to other kinds of communicative action, cannot adopt a neutral or impartial standpoint; hence, they should be more proactive and explicit in the standpoints they represent (Gaupp et al., 2020). Therefore, curating exhibitions that focus on decolonial content could be a further step toward conveying knowledge about non-Western collections. The panel texts in such exhibitions could be employed to investigate more deeply topics such as gender representation.

This exploratory study had a limited aim, and therefore, the exploratory and subjective findings of my netnography. The analysis is, therefore, not extendable to other digitized items. What is clear is that digital collections continue to become more mainstream and prominent. I wrote this article during the COVID-19 pandemic that, on the one hand, led to devastating consequences for some museums and, on the other hand, to the (re)discovery of the value of digital exhibits. The post-COVID-19 era will certainly bring about further changes. Future work on digital museums could rely on the post-COVID-19 experience of museums, curators, and digital visitors to further understand the impacts of the rapid digitization of exhibits. Museums could also learn from the experience of digital visitors—and researchers—to step away from depictions with Orientalist tendencies offline and in digital exhibits. And perhaps digitization can also be seen as a part of a broader move toward democratizing access and further decolonizing museums. This movement is rooted in feminist and critical scholarship inquiring about historical representations and, as this article showed, could lend its critical perspective to the study of digital spheres, including digital museums.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Ladan Rahbari  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3840-708X>

Note

1. Safavids is the term that refers to the dynasty that ruled over Iran and parts of Iraq, Azerbaijan Republic, Bahrain, Armenia, Eastern Georgia, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Turkey, Syria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan for over two centuries.

References

- Afary J (2009) *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- A Reclining Woman and Her Lapdog. (accessed 26 August 2021) Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1930-0412-0-2.
- Babaie S (2009) Visual vestiges of travel: Persian windows on European weaknesses. *Journal of Early Modern History* 13: 105–136.
- Babayani K (2008) 'In spirit we ate each other's sorrow': Female companionship in seventeenth-century Safavi Iran. *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire* 39: 239–274.
- Birjandifar N (2005) Royal women and politics in Safavid Iran (Master Thesis). *Institute of Islamic Studies*. McGill University.
- Chardin J (1993) *Chardin's Travels in Persia*. Tehran: Toos Publication [in Farsi].
- Clarence-Smith WG (2006) *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Comstock-Skipp J (2019) *Loose Pages and Lacquer Covers (National Museum of World Cultures of the Netherlands)*. Available at: <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/research/publications/loose-pages-and-lacquer-covers>.
- Davis JL (2020) *How Artifacts Afford: The Power and Politics of Everyday Things*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Della Valle P (1991) *Travelogue of Pietro Della Valle: Section on Persia*. Tehran: Entesharate Elmi va Farhangi [in Farsi].
- Figuroa DG (1984) *Travelogue of Don Garcia De Sila Figuroa [in Farsi]*. Tehran: Nashre No.
- Gaupp L, Abramjan A, Mervecan Akinay F, et al. (2020) Curatorial practices of the 'global': Toward a decolonial turn in museums in Berlin and Hamburg? *Journal of Cultural Management and Cultural Policy/Zeitschrift für Kulturmanagement und Kulturpolitik* 6: 107–138.
- Geismar H (2018) *Museum Object Lessons for the Digital Age*. London: UCL Press.
- Ghazanfari FS and Tabatabaie Z (2017) The Status of women and music in the safavid era and its representation in the Persian paintings of shah tahmasb's shah-nameh. *Scientific Research Quarterly of Woman and Culture* 9: 57–74.
- Gholsorkhi S (1995) Pari Khan Khanum: A masterful safavid princess. *Iranian Studies* 28: 143–156.
- Grabar O and Natif M (2001) Two Safavid paintings: An essay in interpretation. *Muqarnas* 18: 173–202.
- Grès Y (1973) *The Beautiful Amassador: The Travelogue of French Ambassador to the Court of Shah Soltan Hossein Safavi*. Tehran: Tehran Publications [in Farsi].
- Haberer A (2007) Intertextuality in theory and practice. *Literatūra* 49: 54–67.
- Hosseini Rad A (2014) A newfound illustrated Shahnameh (Called Shahname Shamlou) from the safavid era belongs to the library of the niavaran palace-museum, Tehran. *Honar-Ha-Ye-Ziba: Honar-Ha-Ye-Tajassomi* 18: 43–54.

- Hylland OM (2017) Even better than the real thing? Digital copies and digital museums in a digital cultural policy. *Culture Unbound* 9: 62–84.
- Kaempfer E (1985) *Travelogue of Persia*. Tehran: Kharazmi [in Farsi].
- Karami S, Mokhber Dezfuli F and Alemzadeh H (2018) Educational situation of women in the Safavid court; based on Safavid European travelers journals and paintings. *Iranian Journal for the History of Islamic Civilization* 50: 233–256.
- Khosronejad P (2016) *The face of African slavery in Qajar Iran – in pictures*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/jan/14/african-slavery-in-qajar-iran-in-photos>.
- Landau A (2013) Visibly foreign, visibly female: The eroticization of Zan-i-Farangi in seventeenth century Persian painting. In: Leoni F and MNatif M (eds) *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*. Farnham: Ashgate, 99–130.
- Marasi M (2016) The analysis of blue color usage for «Majnun's» clothing in Persian painting of Timurid and Safavid periods. *Negareh: Journal of Faculty of Art Shahed University* 37: 49–61.
- Matthee R (1998) Between aloofness and fascination: Safavid views of the west. *Iranian Studies* 31: 219–246.
- Matthee R (2011) From the battlefield to the harem: Did women's seclusion increase from early to late Safavid times? In: Mitchell CP (ed) *New Perspectives on Safavid Iran*. Oxon: Routledge, 97–120.
- Matthee R (2014) Alcohol in the islamic Middle East: Ambivalence and ambiguity. *Past & Present* 222: 100–125.
- Mehdid M (1993) A western invention of Arab womanhood: The 'oriental' female. In: Afshar H (ed) *Women in the Middle East*. New York: Springer, 18–58.
- Minowa Y and Witkowski TH (2009) State promotion of consumerism in Safavid Iran: Shah Abbas I and royal silk textiles. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 1: 295–317.
- Mitchell T (2019) *Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Montgomery A (2021) *Smithsonian opens up its collections online*. Available at: <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/5-11-january-2015/smithsonian-opens-up-its-collections-online/>.
- Najmabadi A (2005) *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Najmabadi A and Babayan K (2008) *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Nodehi K, Mofrad TA and Arab Z (2013) The social life of the people in Safavid era of Taleb Amoli poems. *Life Science Journal* 10: 496–499.
- Olearius A (2006) *Travelogue of Adam Olearius: Safavid Persia from a German Traveler's Perspective*. Tehran: Ebtokare No [in Farsi].
- Oyèwùmí O (1997) *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Penn G (2000) Semiotic analysis of still images. In: Bauer M and Gaskell G (eds) *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 227–245.
- Rahbari L (2009) Investigating Discourses of Sexuality during the Safavid Dynasty in Travelogues [in Farsi]. *Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences*. Tehran: Tehran University.
- Rahbari L (2018) "Their beastly manner": Discourses of non-binary gender and sexuality in shi'ite Safavid Persia. *Open Cultural Studies* 2: 758–770.
- Rahbari L (2021) Gendered and ethnic captivity and slavery in Safavid Persia: A literature review. *Social Sciences* 10: 1–11.
- Rezaei F, Nazari Arshad R, Tahmasbizadeh S, et al. (2020) Comparing the image of women in Safavid and Qajar art (Case study: Miniature paintings). *Journal of Islamic Archaeology Studies* 1: 69–86.

- Roostaie S (2017) Representation of European Women in Safavid Persian Painting: Reversing the East-West Dichotomy: Architecture as a Political Battlefield (Master Thesis). University of Florida.
- Said E (1978) *Orientalism: Western Concepts of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon.
- Sanson F (1967) *Travelogue of Sanson: Iranian Kingdom under Shah Suleyman*. Tehran: Ibn Sina [in Farsi].
- Sherley A, Sherley R and Sherley T (1983) *The Travelogue of the Sherley Brothers*. Tehran: Negah [in Farsi].
- Simons H (1970) Orientalism and representation of muslim women as “sexual objects”. *Al-Raida Journal* XX: 23–32.
- Tanavoli P (2016) *European Women in Persian Houses: Western Images in Safavid and Qajar Iran*. London: I.B.Tauris.
- Tavernier J-B (2003) *Travelogue of Tavernier*. Tehran: Niloofar [in Farsi].
- Ulugergerli MY (2017) Perception of the beauty through the century in Persian culture; A condense review. *Journal of Awareness (JoA)* 2: 81–102.
- Woman Applying Henna (accessed 26 August 2021) Available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/451308>.
- Woman Carrying Child with Goldfinch (accessed 25 August 2021) Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1922-0711-0-1-a.
- Woman with a Spray of Flowers (accessed 27 August 2021) Available at: <https://asia.si.edu/object/S1986.296/#object-content>.
- Yaghoobi C (2016) Yusuf’s “queer” beauty in Persian cultural productions. *The Comparatist* 40: 245–266.
- Yamamoto Y and Yamamoto T (2020) Personalization Finder: A Search Interface for Identifying and Self-controlling Web Search Personalization. *Proceedings of the ACM/IEEE Joint Conference on Digital Libraries in 2020*. Virtual Event, China: Association for Computing Machinery, 37–46.
- Zarinebaf-Shahr F (1998) Economic activities of Safavid women in the shrine-city of Ardabil. *Iranian Studies* 31: 247–261.

Author biography

Ladan Rahbari (PhD, Mult), is a political sociologist, an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam, and a senior researcher at the International Migration Institute (IMI). She is a board member of the Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality (ARC-GS) and the Amsterdam Centre for Migration Research (ACMR). Her research interests include gender politics, diaspora, political resistance, and state violence, with a general focus on Iran and Western Europe and in the frameworks of postcolonial, feminist, and critical theories.