

# THREE UNPUBLISHED PICTURES OF RIZA-I 'ABBASI, THE COURT PAINTER OF SHAH 'ABBAS THE GREAT, AND THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT HIS PERSONALITY

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THERE are three contemporary painters-cum-calligraphists of the period of Shah 'Abbas the Great about whom certain confusion in identification has arisen due to the similarity of their names and profession. They are (1) Aqa Riza, (2) Riza-i 'Abbasi and (3) 'Ali Riza. Of these three, the first, Aqa Riza, was a painter and calligraphist, the second, Riza-i 'Abbasi, was purely a painter, and the third, 'Ali Riza, was a calligraphist. Out of the three again, it was Aqa Riza who went over to India and served in the courts of Akbar the Great and Emperor Jahangir.

According to '*Alam Arai 'Abbasi*,<sup>396</sup> they belonged to Kashan, while Jahangir in his *Tuzk*<sup>397</sup> mentions them as hailing from Herat. 'Ali Riza was from Tabriz, and is commonly known as 'Ali Riza 'Abbasi Tabrizi. Riza-i 'Abbasi, the artist under discussion, came from Meshed, according to my presumption. He is known through several of his signed paintings which are scattered over many museums of the world, such as the Boston, Louvre, Bibliotheque Nationale, Tehran and the Metropolitan. His paintings are signed in two different ways, viz. Riza and Riza-i 'Abbasi. Paintings found signed as Aqa Riza do not belong to him, but to Aqa Riza, the son of 'Ali Asghar who went over to India and was also a calligraphist. We shall here discuss all these points in some detail. The pictures signed as Riza by Riza-i 'Abbasi are his earlier pictures, before he became associated with the court of Shah 'Abbas the Great, after whom he adopted the title of 'Abbasi.

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<sup>396</sup> Iskander Beg Turkoman, *Alam Arai Abbasi*, Tehran, 1314 A.H.

<sup>397</sup> *Tuzk-i Jahangiri*, translation by Rogers and Beverage, London, 1909.

My revered friend, Dr. Muhammad ‘Abdullah Chaghtai, was the first to publish a learned article in the *Islamic Culture*,<sup>398</sup> and made an excellent attempt to remove the misunderstanding and confusion about the personalities of these three artists. I shall often be referring to his scholarly: dissertation while discussing my thesis. Since the publication of his article, however, some hitherto unpublished facts have recently come to light, which both clarify and add to the confusion. My real purpose in writing this article is to introduce to my readers three pictures of Riza-i ‘Abbasi reproduced here. In an attempt to do this I found myself entangled in this "eternal triangle" and, in an effort to disentangle myself, I covered a new field on the subject, which I thought may help to further clarify the subject. The following is the result of my research.

### *The Life and Art of Riza-i Abbasi*

In a book recently published in Iran, entitled *Karnameh Buzurgan-i Iran*<sup>399</sup>, it is stated:

بر زندگانی رضاء عباسی بر خلاف معاصرینش که کم و بیش در تواریخ نامی از آنان ذکر شده، هیچ روشن نیست.

Rendered into English it means: "In contrast to his contemporaries whose life is available in the books of history, there is nothing to be found about the life of Riza-i ‘Abbasi. The word معاصرینش (his contemporaries) here probably means the other artists mentioned above, whose names are very similar. The period in which Riza-i ‘Abbasi lived has also been given variously by different writers. But one thing is certain that he lived during the lifetime of Shah ‘Abbas the Great. M.S. Dimand<sup>400</sup> fixes this date between 1587 and 1628 A.D. This corresponds to 996-1038 A.H. This gives him a life-span of 42 years. According to *Karnameh Buzurgan-i Iran* his period is given as lying between the years 995 and 1038 A.H. This gives him an age of 43 years. I am inclined to doubt this statement and feel that our artist lived

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<sup>398</sup> Dr. M. A. Chaghtai, "Aqa Riza-‘Ali Riza-Riza-i-‘Abbasi," *Islamic Culture*, Hyderabad Deccan, Vol. XII, October 1958.

<sup>399</sup> *Karnameh Buzurgan-i Iran*, Department of Publications, Tehran, 1340 Shamsi.

<sup>400</sup> M. S. Dimand, *A Handbook of Muhammadan Art*, Heartsdale House, New York, 1947.

for a longer period of life. This is evident from the date of his signature under his writing on Picture No. 1, which says:

در مشهد مقدس آخر روز جمعه دهم محرم الحرام در دولت خانه در خدمت یاران  
ساخته شد. راقم رضاء ۱۰۰۷ء خصوصاً حاجی می رزا عراجسگے سلمه اله.

["On last Friday, the 10th of Muharram, this picture was drawn in the State House, in the company of friends. Raqam Riza 1007. Specially (?) Haji Mirza Gharajasghi(?)."]

It will be noticed that he has signed his name as Riza only. If he was born in the year 995/996 A.H., then it would mean that our artist at the time of drawing this picture was hardly 11/12 ! This does not seem probable for the following reasons:

- (1) It is rather too young an age to produce such a mature work of art.
- (2) The writing on the side reproduced above also appears mature for that age.

This picture was made in the company of a few intimate friends, and was necessarily drawn in a short time. Also it is not a posed picture obviously, and, therefore, could not have taken a long time. There is humour about the picture, which is very subtle; the mood has been caught spontaneously. This shows a great mastery of the art which is inconceivable at the age of 11/12 years.

(3) This picture was made in the company of a few intimate friends, and was necessarily drawn in a short time. Also it is not a posed picture obviously, and therefore, could not have taken a long time. There is humour about the picture, which is very subtle; the mood has been caught spontaneously. This shows a great mastery of the art which is inconceivable at the age of 11/12 years.

(4) The picture depicts one Haji Mirza Gharajasghi (?) whom I have been unable to identify. He is shown as a bald-headed middle-aged bearded man, Obviously he was an intimate friend of the artist, for he says so in the marginal writing. And if it be true that he painted this picture at the small age of 11/12 years, it is very unlikely that he had friends much older than himself. The bald head gives the figure an elderly appearance. The age of this

gentleman is likely to be between 25 and 35 years. The



Picture No. 1.—Man scratching his head, dated 1007 A.H. Signed as Riza.

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phrase drawn in the company of friends] is very significant and shows that the company in which this picture was drawn was of intimate friends and not just casual acquaintances. They must have been at least of the same age group.

It will be further seen from this picture that the signature is dated 1007. Now, these were tumultuous days, as we learn from the "Life of Shah 'Abbas the Great."<sup>401</sup> It says:

در ۱۰۰۶ بار دیگر عبدالمومن ازبک مشهد را گرفته بسیاری از اهالی شهر را کشته و کراسان را متصرف شد و کود در این سال در ماوراء النهر بجای پدرش عبدالله خان ازبک نشست و از بد رفتاریهای خود بقتل رسید و تا ۱۰۰۸ شر ازبکان از خراسان رفع شد.

["In 1006 'Abdul Momin Uzbek captured Meshed for the second time, and killed a lot of inhabitants of that place, thus occupying Khurasan. In this very year he went and sat in the place of his father 'Abdullah Khan Uzbek in Transoxania. On account of his misdeeds he was murdered and till 1008 the evil cast by the Uzbeks did not clear off from Khurasan."]

Riza-i 'Abbasi till then was known only as Riza! These were the earliest pictures of Riza-i 'Abbasi and much before the time he was actually introduced into the court of Shah 'Abbas. Before I proceed any further I must make one point clear and draw attention of my learned readers to an article by Dr. Mehdi Behrami on Riza-i 'Abbasi which was published in the well-known journal, now defunct,<sup>402</sup> *آئنده* (*Ayendeh*), Vol. III, No. 13. Besides other things which he has confused, I will point out one glaring slip, and that is, Aqa Riza the painter-cum-calligraphist who went over to India never called himself nor has he ever been known as Aqa Riza 'Abbasi. He was known just as Aqa Riza. From the following passage in his writing, Dr.

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<sup>401</sup> Abu al-Kassim Sahab, *Tarikh-o Zindgi Shah 'Abbas Kabir*, Tehran, 1925 Shamsi.

<sup>402</sup> *Ayendeh* ("آئنده"), Vol. III, No. 13, article on Riza-i 'Abbasi by Dr. Mehdi Behrami.

Behrami seems to have retained Aqa Riza in Iran till '020, whereas actually he was in India from the time of Akbar the Great ! Now read the following passage:

مدت کار آقا رضا را از روی قطعات تاریخ وار او میتوان در بین ۱۰۰۷ و ۱۰۴۴ هجری تعیین کرد و یکی از کارهای زیبای او امروز در موزه تهران مشاهده میشود. شاید نخست درم شهید بسر میبرد و تا پیش از ۱۰۲۰ بدر بار ساه عباس تقریبی حاصل نه کرده است و در آغاز امر فقط بنام رصا اکتفا می نموده.

["The period of his life-work as found from the chronograms seems to stretch from 1007 to 1044 A.H. One of his masterpieces is in the Tehran Museum. Probably he first of all settled down in Meshed, as before the year 1020 he did not have access to the court of Shah 'Abbas, and, therefore, in the beginning he was content with just Riza as his name."]

Then again he says:

سر آمد هنرمندان اصفهان در آنوقت آقا رضا بوده که لقب عباسی را از نام شاه عباس بزرگ گرفته.

["One of the topmost artists of that time in Ispahan was Aqa Riza who had adopted the title of 'Abbasi after the name of Shah 'Abbas the Great."]

Now, from the above two quotations it will have become evident that:

- (1) Aqa Riza also used the title 'Abbasi.
- (2) The title 'Abbasi was adopted after 1020 A.H.
- (3) The title was after the Emperor's name.

This is not correct, because: (a) Aqa Riza did not call himself by the title 'Abbasi. He had no reason to do so. He was not in the good books of Shah 'Abbas the Great, and had fled to India, as will be presently shown. (b) Aqa Riza was not in Iran in 1020. He was in India during the time of Akbar the Great. It is, therefore, Riza-i 'Abbasi who signed his name as Riza-i 'Abbasi on his pictures, but never as Aqa Riza. Picture No. 1 reproduced here was

drawn in 1007 and the place of its drawing was Meshed. These two things are established from this picture in favour of Riza-i 'Abbasi.

The period of Shah Abbas's reign is also 985-1038 A.H., which approximates with the period of Riza-i 'Abbasi which we have estimated. Shah 'Abbas the Great, like Emperor Jahangir, was also an artist himself. Painting was his pastime. The art of Riza-i Abbasi at this time had developed to a great height and he was attracting the attention of connoisseurs. His drawings were truly representative of the following attribute: "In human drawing of calligraphist nature lines are suggestive of a joyous play of the moulding outlines of the human body. Without taking the help of the shades, a line gradually growing to a suitable breadth towards the centre, in the form of a muscle fibre, suggests the roundness of a limb and seems to be full with the property of life."<sup>403</sup> Just ponder over these words and look at Picture No. 1 again, and the other two reproduced here. You will find the truth in this statement depicted in his pictures.

Riza-i Abbasi had attained such a fame that many an artist who came afterwards adopted the title 'Abbasi after him. As an instance may be cited the name of Shafi' 'Abbasi. Dr. M. A. Chaghtai suspects him to be the son of Riza-i 'Abbasi, but I have not come across any evidence in support of it. Dr. Chaghtai, however, thinks correctly that his style clearly bears a Western influence." I feel that Riza-i 'Abbasi was the only person after Maulana Shaikh Muhammad Sabzwari to have popularised in Iran the style of painting after the Western manner. From the dates given above of the period of Riza-i 'Abbasi's life, I am inclined to stretch it back by another ten years and make it 985-1038, and not 995-1038 A.H.! This would make him twenty-two years of age in the year 1007 when he painted Picture No. 1.

A few words more about the art of Riza-i 'Abbasi. Look at Picture No. 1 again. The posture of the scratching left hand and the expression on the face are superb and meaningful. The main peculiarity of this drawing is that it is rendered in a calligraphic manner consisting of sure undulating curves combined with short curves.

Look now at Picture No. 2. You will find four horses with two faces! They are drawn in such a manner so as to look four. The lines and the

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<sup>403</sup> M. Zia-ud-Din, *Moslem Calligraphy*, Santiniketan Press, India, 1936.

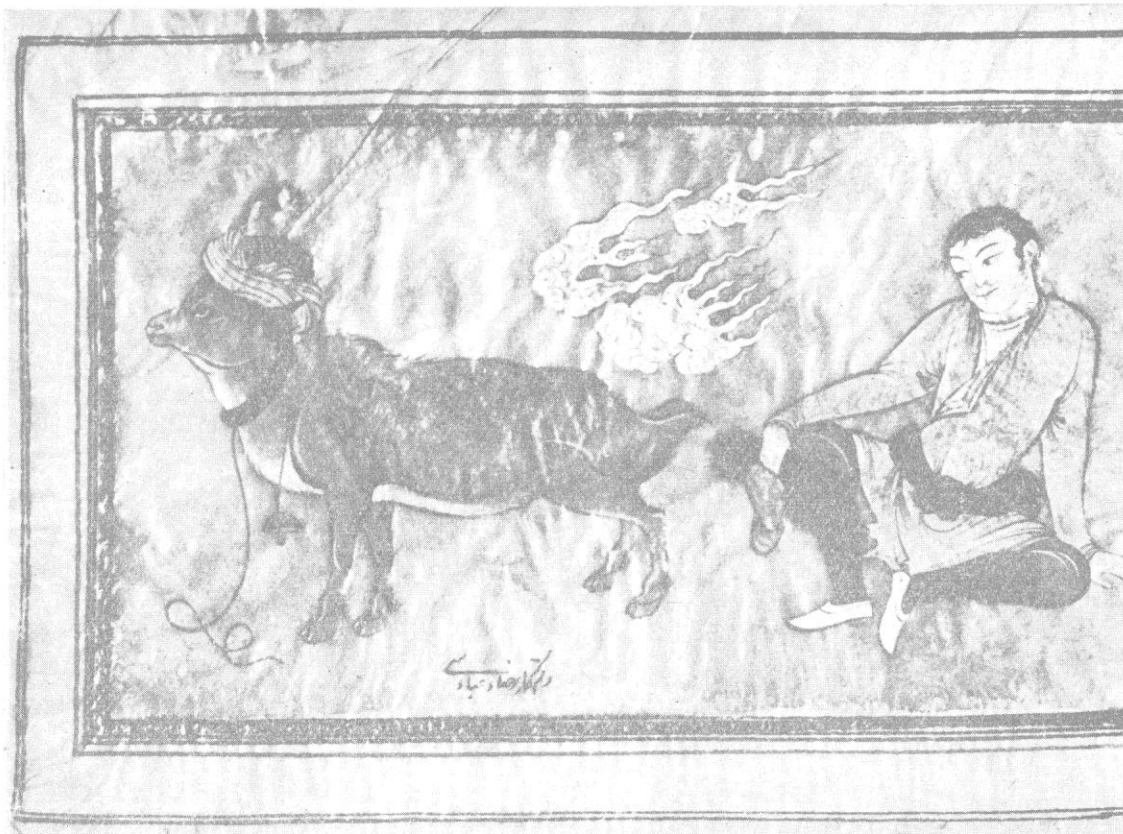


strokes are so exquisite that they give a postural excellence to each pose. Except for the long back lines the rest of them are short. The two heads have been joined together in such a way that it gives the appearance of two stretched horses and two bending ones. The two fully stretched horses are in a galloping mood, while the two bending horses are in a drinking posture. The figure in each is perfect, and there is no break in the anatomy of the animals. Except for the two long strokes the rest of them are small and short. The calligraphic strokes are alternatively thick and thin in places, thus giving an appropriate shape to the muscles in action. It must not be construed from my statement that because his strokes are calligraphic, therefore, he was the calligraphist Aqa Riza or 'Ali Riza! Not the least. But this is the peculiarity and beauty of Riza-i 'Abbasi's art of drawing.

Riza-i 'Abbasi's influence has been found in many works of art in Iran. The Chihil Sutun or the "Hall of Forty Pillars" in Ispahan, and the garden pavilion Ala Kapi or the "Sublime Portel" have been decorated in his style. Figures of Europeans have been introduced into these decorations ! Many of the miniatures found in the *Shah Nameh* manuscripts reveal the influence of Riza-i 'Abbasi. Some authors have confused the two, Riza-i 'Abbasi and 'Ali Riza Tabrizi, while commenting on the art of these manuscripts. M.S. Dimand falls into this category. However, he is quite convinced about the artistic excellence of Riza-i 'Abbasi, and admits that his drawings are life-like: "His genre scenes and portraits are characterised by close observation of life." Look now at Picture No. 3. Pictures No. 1 and 3 are amply illustrative of this description. The third picture shows *a* humorous but relaxing attitude of a sheep-owner, who has let loose his sheep in order to relax himself near by. A further humorous touch has been given to the picture by placing a turban on the head of the sheep. The sheep itself *is a* peculiar combination of a cow and a sheep, as would appear from the hoofs and the legs, the neck and the fat tail of the animal. Even the face is a mixed one I would not be surprised if this picture is a sort of a cartoon drawn in lighter vein! Pictures No. 2 and 3 are drawn on the peritoneum of a deer and hence look shrivelled.

Picture No. 2.—Four horses with two heads. Signed Raqam Kar Riza-i 'Abbasi, undated.





Picture No. 3.—The Sheep and the Shepherd. Signed Raqam Kar Riza-i 'Abbasi, undated.

## *Controversy of Signatures*

All the three pictures are signed. Pictures with signatures are also reproduced in other books of Persian art, and in reproductions in learned dissertations. Three types of signatures are found, e.g. (a) Riza, (b) Riza-i 'Abbasi, and (c) Aqa Riza. Let me first discuss the signatures on the pictures reproduced here, as they have so far remained unpublished. The peculiarity of the signature of Riza-i 'Abbasi is that he is in the habit of joining the R with Z (رضا). This is clearly discernible in Picture No. 1. In Pictures No. 2 and 3, although they are not exactly joined, one can see they are in the process of joining. In figure 29 on page 54 of his book, M.S. Dimand has reproduced two pictures of the artist which are both signed. On both the pictures, the artist has signed as follows: رقم کمینه رضاء عباسے which means "drawn by the humble Riza-i 'Abbasi." In Pictures No. 2 and 3 reproduced here, he has signed as (رقم کار رضاء عباسے) which again means "drawn by Riza-i 'Abbasi" or the "work of Riza-i 'Abbasi." Now, on page 523 of the *Karnameh Buzurgan-i Iran* a miniature of Riza-i 'Abbasi has also been reproduced. Here also he signed as (رقم کار رضاء عباسے) . The name Riza, in Picture No. 1, in the pictures reproduced by Dimand and in the one just mentioned from *Karnameh Buzurgan-i Iran* is written in exactly the same manner and is absolutely identical. Dr. M. A. Chaghtai in his article mentioned above has also reproduced two miniatures: one signed as آقا رضا and the other as (رقم کار رضاء عباسے) . The picture of Aqa Riza is that of a mystic. In this the word "Riza" is signed in an entirely different manner, the R and Z being distinctly separate. The second picture of a "Youth Reading" bears a signature which is identical with the signature of Riza-i 'Abbasi which I have demonstrated above.

The influence of Riza-i 'Abbasi on the Iranian paintings, as I have mentioned above, has been considerable, especially during the two centuries which followed him. We find that he was being imitated by eminent painters

like Yusuf, Kassim and Mu'in. D. Barnett of the British Museum<sup>404</sup> says, "His dominating influence, especially in living drawings, which is often most charming and expressive, lasted right through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

I would like here to devote a few more words to the other two artists, viz. Aqa Riza and 'Ali Riza. 'Ali Riza, I have stated above, was a calligraphist and remained in Iran all his life, while Aqa Riza, besides being a painter, also dabbled in calligraphy. 'Ali Riza came from Tabriz. He was a master of Nasta'liq style of writing, and was also quite at home with Naskh. It was he who decorated the "Ala Kapi" with his magnificent calligraphy. He also decorated the interior of the dome of Lutfullah Mosque in Ispahan. His decoration of the Masjid-i Shah in Ispahan bears the date 1025 A.H. His life is traceable only up to the year 1038 A.H. The date of his death is not known.

Aqa Riza is the figure upon whom '*Alam Arai 'Abbasi* has dwelt at some length. According to him he hailed from Kashan. But Jahangir in his *Tuzk* states that he came from Herat. It is probable that when he came to India he may have been at the time of his departure staying at Herat. It is worthwhile quoting fully from '*Alam Arai 'Abbasi*, and then analyse for a while the implications of his statement. He says:

مولانا اصغر علی کاشی استاد بیقرینه و مصور پاکیزه ساخت در پرداخت و رنگ آمیزی منفرد و درکوه پردازی و درکت سازی از اقران در پیش بود او نیز در خدمت سلطان ابراهیم میرزا می بود. در زمان میرزا اسمعیل از اصحاب کتاب خانه شد پسرش آقا رضا در فن تصویر و یکه و صورت چهره کشائی ترقی عظیم کرده عجوبه زمانه گشت و در این عصر و زمان مسلم الثبوت استا ز جهات نفس بآن نزاکت قلم همیشه زور آزمائی ورزش کشتی گیری کرده از شیوه محفوظ بودی و از صحبت ارباب استعداد

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<sup>404</sup> D. Barnett, "Islamic Art in Persia," *The Legacy of Persia*, Oxford, 1953.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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کناره جسته بآن طبقه الفت داشتی و در این عهد فی الجمله از آن پر زه در آئی باز آمده ما متوجه کار کمتر میشود او نیز بطریق صادقی بیگ بد مزاج تنک حوصله سپرد اختلاط است. الحق استغنائی در طبیعتش هست در کدمت حضرت اعلیٰ ظل المہی مورد عواطف گزید و رعایهتای کلی یافت اما از اطوار نا ہنجار صاحب اعتبار و نشد و ہمیشہ مفلس و پریشان حال است۔

["Maulana 'Ali Asghar of Kashan was an incomparable master and an accomplished painter; as an artist and colourist he was unique and unsurpassed by his contemporaries in drawings of streets and trees. He also took service with Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, and in the time of Isma'il Mirza was on the staff of the Library. His son, Aqa Riza, became the marvel of the age in the art of painting and unequalled in these days. In spite of the delicacy of his touch, he was so uncultured that he constantly engaged in athletic practices and wrestling and became infatuated with such habits. He avoided the society of men of talents, and gave himself up to the association of such low persons. At the present time he has repented for such idle



Picture No. 4.—Portrait of the Painter Riza-i 'Abbasi by Mu'in.

frivolity a little, but he pays very little attention to his art, and like Sadiq Beg he has become ill-tempered, peevish and unsocial. In the service of His Majesty, the Shadow of God, he has been the recipient of favours and considerations, but on account of his evil ways he has not taken warning and consequently he is always poor and in distress."]

To me it appears that his poverty and degradation in the eyes of Shah 'Abbas was the cause of his leaving the court of Iran and seeking his fortunes elsewhere in India. This had happened before 1014 A.H., which is the date of Akbar the Great, for he arrived with his son during the lifetime of Akbar. It is stated in the *Karnameh Buzurgan-i Iran*:

بالآخر بار سفر بسته به هندوستان رفت و بخدمت "جلال الدین اکبر پیوست و پس از سالی چند که اکبر وفات یافت "جهانگیر پادشاه" ۱۰۱۴-۱۰۳۷) ویرا مشمول عنایت و التفات فرمود و او ب پسرش "ابوالحسن" که در نقاش تربیت عظیم کرد در کدمت این پادشاه نوازش بسیار یافتند... و ہم در هندوستان این پدر و پسر وفات یافتند.

["At last he proceeded on a travel to India and got himself attached to the court of Jalal-ud-Din Akbar. And after some years when Akbar had died, Jahangir Padshah (1014-1037) turned a benevolent eye on him. And he and his son Abul Hasan who was a well-trained artist were well rewarded in the service of this king ... And the father and the son died in India and were buried there."]

From the above two accounts it will have become clear that it was Aqa Riza who came to India and not Riza-i 'Abbasi. Further, Riza-i 'Abbasi became associated with the court of Shah 'Abbas after which he called himself by the name of 'Abbasi. Aqa Riza did not do so.

#### *Portrait of Riza-i 'Abbasi*

Dr. M.A. Chaghtai, in his learned article referred to above, says: "There exist three portraits of Riza-i 'Abbasi the painter by his pupil Mu'in Musawwar, made on different occasions, and at the request of different



persons, as we learn from the inscriptions which they bear; they are all dated between 1084 and 1087 A.H."

I reproduce here one of those portraits. See Picture No. 4. It has been taken from the article of Dr. Behrami referred to above. My reading of the inscription slightly varies from that of Dr. Chaghtai's. This is how I read it:

شبيهه مرحمت و مغفرت پناهی مرحومی جنت مکانی استاد رضا مصوری عباسی  
رحمة الله و الغفران بتاريخ سنه ۱۰۴۰ تقال شده بود و بتاريخ پنجم شهر صفر - - - - سنه  
۱۰۸۷ بیادگار جهت مرقع با تمام رسید مبارک باد شقه معین مصور غفر الله زنوبه.

The version of Dr. Chaghtai runs follows:

شبيهه مرحمت و مغفرت بناهی مرحوم جنت مکان استاد رضا مصور عباسی علیه  
الرحمة و الغفران بتاريخ ۱۰۴۴-۱۰۸۷ بیار کار بجهت مرقع و تمام رسید مبارک باد  
مشقه معین مصور غفر الله زنوبه.

Variations have been marked by lines. It is apparent that Mu'in started this picture in the lifetime of Riza-i 'Abbasi, but completed it at a much later date. Mu'in himself lived long after Riza, and in a picture of his preserved in the Tehran Museum, we find that he completed it in the year 1097 A.H. His works are also available which are dated 1110 A.H.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY