THE NARENJESTAN

A Brief History And Interpretation Of The House

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The Narenjestan was the product of a particular city, family and time. Before going on to a discussion of the house itself it may be useful to provide some brief background material on these the elements which formed it.

The City

Shiraz at the time of the building of the Narenjestan in the late 19th century had behind it some thirteen hundred years of history. Three dynasties had made the city their capital—one of these imperial. It was at the time of the latter that Shirazis referred to Cairo as their "suburb." In the 10th century, the city supported one of the great libraries of the East. It was then too that its scholars produced an encyclopaedia of much renown. Later a hospital and university were founded, second only to Baghdad. It was in Shiraz as well that the first distinctively Persian miniatures were painted and by the 15th century Shiraz was the center of the art. Finally, Persia's two greatest poets, Sa'adi and Hafez, were born and buried in the city.

These peaks of achievement were, however, interrupted by many long and steep declines. Earthquakes, floods, famines, plagues, droughts, invasions, and massacres often reduced the city to little more than its site. A traveller visiting in 1811 found it mainly in ruins and with a mere twenty thousand inhabitants.

By the time of the building of the Narenjestan, the city had recovered somewhat and although by no means large and opulent it was regarded with much affection by Persians
and Western travellers alike. Part of this regard was no doubt due to the first impression which the city gave.

Shiraz is situated at the end of a long and narrow valley. The valley wall above the city is broken by a gorge and it was through this gorge that most travellers arrived. Here they entered a gate in the second story of which was a Quran of miraculous powers and which, it is said, passed down a benediction; at the same time the first view of the city opened out below them—a spread of green on the valley floor, hatched across in brown by the tops of clay walls, and near the center, rising up above the rest, the pale, green bloom of a shrine dome. Around the edges of the green there were long files of cypress and up the near slopes of the hills terraces of vineyards. Above lay the burning blue of the Persian sky. To most travellers, after days in the desert, it looked like a little Eden.

Down into the city, they found it modest but pleasing; narrow, walled lanes passed among vineyards and orchards and by long, flat-roofed clay houses. There was a handsome, stoutly built bazaar, the remains of a little 18th century palace complex, the shrine with a gold finial at its top, a square, and a fort with a tower at each corner and storks' nests. The most pleasing thing, however, about Shiraz were its large gardens, over thirty of them, a surprising number for so small a city, and each with its own pavilion. In addition, there were the tomb gardens of famous dervishes and poets and which in the local custom were places of resort. The city too was favored by a good climate; sunny, temperate winters, the summers cooled by all the trees and open water channels. Even the products of
Shiraz were idyllic—limes and honey, wine and grain. Finally, there were the people of Shiraz, famous for their gentle hedonism and their hospitality.

The city of course had its other sides. There was disease, violent civil feuds, certainly injustice, the recurring natural disasters. Nonetheless, there in the temperate, fertile valley, guarded by the shrine and fort, graced by gardens and the long alleys of cypress, it was a better place than many in which to live.

The Family

This then was the city in which the family of Qavam built the Narenjestan. At the time of the building the family were, in view of the long history of the city, relative newcomers to the place. The first of the family, Hassan Khan Tiyare, a merchant from Qazvin, came to the city in the middle 18th century. He and his son became important ministers at the court of the Zands. The power of the family, however, reached its peak in this period with Ebrahim Khan, grandson of the first Qavam. He was mayor of Shiraz and later, by deserting the Zands and thus earning the favor of the aspiring Qajars, he became Prime Minister in Tehran to the first two Qajar Rulers. He also exerted considerable power through his five sons who were governors of important provincial cities.

Ebrahim Khan had, however, and as might be expected, an enemy at court. Legend has it that the enemy had letters written to the five sons to which he affixed their father's seal. The letters urged the sons
to rebel against the Shah. The messengers bearing the letters were in due course intercepted and the letters shown to the Shah. The result was that by royal order Ebrahim Khan was boiled till dead. His five sons, together with their male offspring, were also executed. Only a five year old boy, already dying of small-pox, was spared.

But he recovered. His nurse brought him to Qasr-al-Dasht, a suburb of Shiraz, and there he grew up. His name was Ali Akbar. Obsessed by the degradation which had fallen on his family, it was Ali Akbar's custom to stand by the wayside with bowed head whenever the Prince-Governor passed. This may have provoked the attention of the Prince-Governor but it did not produce an introduction. Ali Akbar, now about eighteen years old, came up with another plan. Though poor he found enough money to buy a fine aba—a kind of camel hair cloak—and this he packed in an ornate chest and presented to the Prince-Governor. He then requested the Prince-Governor to publicly bestow the aba on himself, Ali Akbar, so that the people of the city might see that he was favored. Charmed by this ploy and learning now the identity of the boy, the Prince-Governor related the incident to his father, the Shah. It happened that the Shah had in the meantime learned that he had been the victim of a ruse and that Ebrahim Khan had indeed been a faithful minister. Anxious to make reparations to this last remaining Qavam, he instructed his son, the Prince-Governor, to behave toward Ali Akbar with all kindness. Shortly thereafter Ali Akbar became mayor of Shiraz. Later he took for his wife a daughter of the Shah. It was now, too, that the family was ennobled by the title of Qavam-al-Mulk.
From then till now the Qavams have remained a family of distinction in Persia. The writer is most grateful to the late Qavam-al-Mulk for the information which he so kindly provided on the building of the Narenjestan. The Qavam-al-Mulk's sister, Zinat-al-Mulk, who continued to reside in the anderun, or women's quarters, of the Narenjestan until 1970, was also most kind in providing information on the house. Finally, Dr. Abu-al-Qasem Qavami, Vice-Chancellor of Pahlavi University, gave invaluable information on the history of his family.

The House

Mirza Ebrahim Khan, great-grandson of the Qavam of the aba, and grandfather of the recent Qavam-al-Mulk, began the building of the Narenjestan in the late 1870's. He chose as the site of the house a quarter in the south-east part of the city with which the family had always been associated. Also this quarter was the approach to the city from south-east Fars, the area of the five Arab tribes, called the Khamsheh federation, and of which the Qavams had been made the hereditary Il-Khans.

So far as is known, the Narenjestan was designed by Mirza Ebrahim Khan in collaboration with a master mason. It consisted of a group of buildings then collectively called the Narenjestan. Today only the building which houses the Asia Institute is so known. Formerly this building was the biruni, or men's quarters. The anderun, or women's quarters, stands immediately to the West and is still connected to the biruni by a tunnel. Its
tile gable and arched brick entrance may be seen from the Narenjestan garden. There was in addition one or more smaller houses for other members of the extended Qavam family. The biruni kitchens were immediately to the East, the baths to the rear of these, and there were as well three stables located at various points. The family mosque was not within the complex but stands about half a kilometer to the West. There was, however, a Hossainieh, in this case a walled maidan opposite the Narenjestan and to which during the month of Muharram the people of the quarter were invited to hear related stories of the agony and death of Hossain, grandson of the Prophet. These then were the principal buildings of the complex.

Before going on to a description of the construction and decorative materials used in the house, it may be useful to discuss the purposes of the Narenjestan and thus the plan it employed.

The Qavams at the time of the building of the complex, maintained two country houses. Delgosha, which was situated on the slopes below the tomb garden of Sa'adi, was used for winter. For summer there was another garden 'Afifabad or Bagh-i Gulshan located several kilometers to the West of the city. Thus the Narenjestan was a town house. This required a biruni of amplitude and opulence.

A traditional Persian biruni serves three purposes. First of all, it is a place of business, an office. Remembering that Persian families are large and that they may, and ideally do, engage in a variety of enterprises, these offices were often extensive and always of much importance. Secondly, a biruni is a place of ceremonious
reception, and in the full and formal sense of those terms. Finally, it is a guest house and so is provided with sleeping quarters.

The original offices of the Narenjestan are to be found immediately to the left and right after passing from the street through the entry vestibule. Thus, in the old days, Persians calling on purely business matters were not required, nor encouraged, to go to the reception and guest quarters which lay beyond. The offices consisted of half a dozen rooms fronted by commodious verandas, or ivans, to use the Persian term. The verandas served as ante-rooms or waiting rooms. The large garden, extending North from the verandas but fenced and gated off from the main building at the end, served the same purpose. Here people might stroll or sit under a tree, waiting their turn—for the accomplishment of business in Persia can, on occasion, take some time. There was in addition another waiting area, though somewhat less agreeable than the muralled verandas and the garden with its grove of naranj trees; this was the prison, located in the cellar of the office block.

Guests arriving for some day-time reception or to spend the night, ignored the offices and proceeded directly from the entry vestibule into the long avenue which bisects the garden and ends at a slightly raised terrace. In the center of this terrace is a large reflecting pool. A bit beyond it and above, occupying the whole center of the main building, is the great reception talar, roofed and pillared, open to the pool and garden, most of the walls and ceiling covered with mosaic mirror work. Whether it was daytime and sunlight or night
when the eight three-tiered chandeliers were lit, the guests coming from the entry vestibule saw at the end of the long vista a great blaze of light. The Qavam-al-Mulk, the master, the provider, the very incarnation of all this light, sat in a small room at the rear of the *talar*, a room entirely faced by mosaic mirror work and so giving the impression of being the interior of an enormous, gaudy jewel.

Light has always meant much to the Persians, from fire, the sun and moon, pyrotechnic displays, mirrors and gems, the reflecting surfaces of pools. There are still Persians, Moslem Persians, who bid goodnight to the candle before they blow it out. Light too plays an important part in the language, particularly in the old forms of address: "Sublime Sovereign whose standard is the sun, whose splendour is that of the firmament." "Exalted like the planet Saturn." "Footpath of heaven." "Monarch of armies numerous as the stars." Today, one of the titles of His Imperial Majesty, the Shahan-Shah is" "Arya-Mehr" i.e., the light of the Aryans. Therefore, it is not surprising that when in the 19th century the new-type looking glasses began to arrive in quantity from Europe, the Persians soon turned them to their own use and so it was that the arriving guest at the Narenjestan found the Qavam at the center of a dazzling effulgence.

The *talar*, then, was the place of reception in the Narenjestan, with the throne room at its rear for the Qavam and the elect. There are as well several interesting extensions to this reception area. They consist of four second-story rooms, two of which are at the rear of the *talar*, the other two at either side, and each of which
has a large window looking down into the talar. Persian receptions tend to be long and very formal. Thus these small, intimate rooms were provided for those who might wish to absent themselves for a little while in order to rest informally, sleep, or engage in some other activity which might not have been decorous in the midst of the talar assemblage. Also, Persian society is such that a host may be entertaining simultaneously several groups of people who, for various reasons, it is not desirable to mix. The little rooms then also served this purpose. One of the advantages of these rooms lay in the fact that though they were quite private, the occupants could look down on the talar and so keep track of what was going on and also enjoy the tamasha or spectacle. It is to be noted, however, that they were not provided with a view of the throne room.

The guest quarters of the Narenjestan lay to either side of the talar and were separated from it by corridors. The two blocks were almost identical except for details of decoration. Each block consisted of the following: a grand salon and next to it a smaller salon. The latter may have served as sleeping quarters; it is provided as well with a small veranda where guests might sleep on summer nights. A stairway in this small salon leads to a second-story room. Also, the rooms looking down on the talar became at night adjuncts to the guest quarters. They are reached by a stairway at the end of each corridor and thus--two on one side, two on the other--they became an integral part of each guest block.

The plan of the guest quarters is ingenious. By virtue of the fact that all the rooms, excepting two, have private access,
and due to the arrangement of the corridors, the guest quarters of the Narenjestan could provide the following combinations: two suites of five rooms each; four suites, two of three rooms each and two of two rooms each; four suites of two rooms each plus two single rooms; two suites of two rooms each plus six single rooms. The intricacies of Persian society and hospitality sometimes made this flexibility desirable.

In general, however, it is likely that the arrangement of two suites with five rooms each was the more usual combination at the Narenjestan. The kind of Persian to have stayed there as a guest no doubt would have travelled with a large retinue of relatives, intimates and personal servants. Thus five rooms would have been needed. At the same time, five rooms, however large the retinue, probably would have been enough for it is the Persian custom and preference to sleep many in a single room. It might be noted here that there was no dining-room in the Narenjestan. The reason is that the traditional Persian "dining table" is simply a cloth laid down the center of a room, removed after food has been eaten.

In general, the guest quarters at the Narenjestan were both functional and pleasing. As we have seen, all but two of the ten rooms had private access and yet they were grouped in such a fashion that they could, if desired, function as units. So far as the main two blocks were concerned—the usual units—these were separated and thus made private by the talar, ideal when, as must sometimes have happened, the Qavam was entertaining guests of different position and interests. As for the Qavam himself, he would by late evening or earlier have left the talar,
retiring through the tunnel to his family quarters, leaving his guests to their private affairs and pleasures. Finally, as we shall see, these quarters were sumptuously decorated, thus impressing the guests with the riches and taste of their host while at the same time flattering them by the opulence put at their disposal.

The guest and reception quarters of the Narenjestan were completed by a half-basement summer room. Though this is a fairly commodious and attractive room faced with patterned brick, it lacks the grandness of the summer rooms in other Qavam houses. This probably was due to the fact that the room was not much used since the Qavams ordinarily would have spent the summers at their country estates.

In terms of its purposes— as an office, a place of reception and a guest house— the Narenjestan was superbly planned. To the modern architect, so concerned with function, this bedizened structure should provide an instructive example of a building in which ornament and function do not preclude each other— a romantic building but practical as well. Further, the Narenjestan contains much balance and variety. From every room one looks out on the water and trees of the garden, and beyond, across the palms and tulip domes of the quarter, to the mountains. Variation in scale extends from the talar— 30 ft long, 17 wide, 20 high— to the low-ceilinged chambers at its rear which measure 6 by 16 ft. Further, no room could be more public than the talar while some of the second story rooms are entirely private. Finally, decoration passes from the subdued and simple treatment of these upper-story rooms to the overwhelmingly elaborated throne chamber. The Narenjestan provided for many moods and tastes.
To return to the construction and decoration of the building, so far as is known all the workmen and artisans were from Shiraz. The basic construction materials—mud brick, field stone and oak beams—were also from the area. The materials used in decoration were as follows.

**BRICK:** Brick is used structurally and decoratively at the entrance, in the entrance vestibule, on the facades, and in the summer room (the latter entirely restored.) The best examples of brickwork are in the lateral passages leading from the entry vestibule, and in the summer room.

**TILE:** There is a variety of tile, all of which is local, and it is used extensively. The most interesting examples are the following. In the entry vestibule the tile is affixed in star forms to the ends of the stalactites. Also, in large pictorial panels it is used on the garden side of the vestibule and on the gables of the main building. The garden wall panel depicts three servants offering pears, wine, and sherbet. The scene is the focal point of all outlooks from the main building and thus is a constant reminder that the Narenjestan is a place of hospitality. In the spandrels above the servant scene, Solomon and Rostam are portrayed in an episode from the Shah-Nameh. Other, smaller panels along the wall depict hunting scenes and popular miniature subjects, particularly Shireen surprised at her bath. In the center gable of the main building deep blue arabesques lie against a pastel floral. There is as well the emblem of Persia, the lion and the sun, while above angels hold aloft a crown. In the center in white on black is a Quranic inscription. The side gables portray a Persepolitan motif of a tiger killing a cow, a subject which appears again and again at
the Narenjestan. There are also tile insets—
some in a striking crown pattern—in the
brick of the facade. There is tile work in
the baths but these are no longer a part of
the Narenjestan.

In general, the tile at the
Narenjestan is crude if compared with the
work of a century earlier and which may be
seen on the facade of the Shiraz museum,
formerly a part of the Zand palace complex.
By the time of the Narenjestan the fine art
of tile had become a folk art.

STONE: The stone, which is local,
is used at the base of all exterior walls and
in the two great columns supporting the
talar. Below the tile panel of the servants
there is a bas-relief of Persepolitan
figures bearing New Year gifts. At the base
of the talar the stone is perforated by a
four pointed medallion from which flow bas-
relief arabesques. On either side of these,
also in bas-relief, are panels of trees,
done in the style of the Shiraz miniaturists.
Finally, at the ends stand soldiers of the
period. The columns of the talar above were
each carved from a single block of stone.
At the base of the guest blocks Persepolitan
animal figures are portrayed.

MARBLE: The marble, brought from
Tabriz or Yazd, is used in the dadoes of all
the principal rooms as well as in the fireplace
in the throne room. The fireplace presents
Jamsheed and other Persepolitan figures in
low relief outlined with gold leaf. Here
were two sketches of Mohammad Reza Khan, son
of Mirza Ebrahim Khan, who completed the
building of the Narenjestan in 1300 Hijra
(1885.)
WOOD, INLAID: All doors are of inlaid wood, the wood itself being local walnut. The inlay is mainly Indian teak, and mother-of-pearl from the Persian Gulf.

WOOD, PAINTED: With the exception of the throne room and parts of the talar, all ceilings in the main building are of painted wood. In the talar, painted wood, surrounded by mirror work, forms the ground as it were of the ceiling design. It consists of florals and animals of the chase. In the two main salons the all wood ceilings are identical and in effect represent a carpet. Gold arabesques spread across a cream ground. In the center is a longitudinal medallion in green and yellow at the points of which are six oval water scenes. As in a carpet, the borders carry the colors of the center. The small salon ceilings are painted copies of European wall-papers with the wall-papers themselves forming the borders of the ceilings. The rooms above the small salons, as well as the second story rooms to either side of the talar, have ceilings of painted beams. These are particularly interesting because of the endless and charming water scenes portrayed and because of the reproductions in the genre of Currier & Ives which are pasted on the beams. In these rooms too, as well as in others, there are many reproductions of 19th-century European ladies. It is said that these pictures came from the wrapping paper in which bolts of cloth were sent from Europe to Persia.

PLASTER, plain: Plain plaster, or that is to say unpainted plaster, is used elaborately in the two ivans or verandas of the main building. The technique was to stencil the design onto the plaster and then to carve it out—in the case of the ivans carved out with some gusto. Plaster was
used with more restraint in the simple and often beautiful mouldings of the main West salon and upper story rooms. The best example of this is in the West second story room. This room, though simple, is one of the most handsome in the house. It is interesting to compare the fireplace, which is of native design, with its Victorian counterparts in the throne chamber and East salon.

PLASTER, PAINTED: This is to be found in the main East salon. The work appears to have been inspired by the 19th-century Shiraz miniaturists and in fact it is said that the decoration of this room, and possibly the ceilings, was under the supervision of Lutf 'Ali Suratgar, a famous miniaturist of the period.

GLASS AND MIRROR: Stained glass, brought from England, was used extensively in the windows and may be seen as well forming a crown in the arch above the throne room. It was also used as a component in the mirror-work. The mirror-work is of two kinds. First, plain mirror cut out in various shapes and used in an overall mosaic. Second, a form consisting of four layers: mirror, stained glass, cut-out mirror, clear glass. All the mirrors and glass of the Narenjestan were imported from abroad. The particular kind of mirror-work done in the house is said to have originated in Shiraz.

These, then, were the principal decorative materials used at the Narenjestan. As for the decoration itself, the non-representational motifs are mainly from carpet designs; arabesques, medallions, and blossom forms. The representational motifs are three and probably reflect the main leisure time activities of a 19th-century Persian gentleman; the hunt, women, and idyllic nature with its associations of poetry and ease.
It is often said that the 19th century in Persia was a period of deepest decadence. One wonders if a traveller, entering through the Quran Gate, and passing down amongst the gardens and through the alleys of cypress, would have entirely agreed. Received by the Qavam-al-Mulk, he would have observed the charming and faultless manners of a Persian nobleman. Led to the guest quarters of the Narenjestan he would have seen the elegance and sense which the Persians could provide. And finally at night in the dazzling talar he would have witnessed a hospitality extraordinary for its vividness and grace. If he had been an informed traveller, he would have known that beyond all of this there was much that was barbaric, but he would have known as well that there were things, such as the Narenjestan and aspects of the life it represented, which were very civilized indeed.

Recent History and Renovation

The Narenjestan was used as a biruni by the Qavam-al-Mulk until forty years ago. Subsequently the Qavam-al-Mulk gave the building to his grandson, His Highness Prince Shahram. In 1966 Prince Shahram in his kindness bestowed the building on the Asia Institute of Pahlavi University. Her Imperial Majesty, the Shahbanu, to whose interest in Persian art and architecture the nation will always be grateful, graciously provided a fund for its restoration. Most of the restoration was under the supervision of the staff of the Asia Institute, and the staff of Pahlavi University. Last and indeed not least are the artisans of Shiraz, Isfahan and Tehran, and their apprentices, who did the actual restoration of the building.
The Narenjestan was built to serve as a place of business, a place of reception, and a place where visitors might stay. It is good that the old house will once again fulfill those purposes as the headquarters of the Asia Institute. And certainly Mirza Ebrahim Khan and Mohammed Reza Khan, the builders of the house, would find it most just that the present occupants of the Narenjestan are completely devoted to the culture and arts of Persia and serve the nation as best they can.
The Asia Institute

The Asia Institute is a non-profit institution of Pahlavi University devoted to the culture and civilization of Iran from the earliest times to the present. It is the successor of the Asia Institute of New York City and its predecessor the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology which was founded in 1930 by the late Arthur Upham Pope.

In its present home in the Narenjestan of Qavam a number of activities are being conducted under its auspices. A library of books, periodicals, offprints and unpublished studies concerned with the art, archaeology history and culture of Iran is being assembled in pleasant Qajar surroundings. It is hoped that the library will contain all publications relating to Fars province and southern Iran and extensive collections of periodicals and material from adjacent areas.

The archives of the Asia Institute contain almost 20,000 photographic negatives, prints and slides of historic buildings and remains in Iran and neighboring lands. Included are photographs of pottery, rugs, metalwork and other arts, and card files of sources relating to the history of Fine Arts in Iran and adjacent countries. The files are being expanded and photographs are being added to the collection. A photographic dark-room serves as a workshop for work in the Institute.

The archaeological laboratory is the third section of the Narenjestan, where collections of potsherds from southern Iran, both from surveys and excavations, are classified and entered into a "sherd library." Facilities for students investigating the
collections exist. A map room with aerial photographs and drawing boards, adjoins the archaeological laboratory.

Two lecture halls provide space for visiting lectures or classes, and three rooms and one apartment are available to house visiting scholars. It is hoped that an MA program in the art, archaeology and history of Iran, and eventually a Ph.D program will be developed in the future.

Finally, the publications of the Asia Institute reflect its activities. Two numbers of the Bulletin of the Asia Institute and one monograph, on excavations at Yahya Tepe in Kirman have appeared. In press are other publications on the Masjidd-i 'Atiq of Shiraz, the A.U. Pope memorial volume, and others. It is hoped that the future will see new publications on archaeological, architectural and historical work of the Institute.

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