



# **SUKIAS HOUSE AND ITS WALL PAINTINGS: REFLECTION OF ENGLISH-ARMENIAN LINKS IN THE SAFAVID PERIOD (1501-1736 AD) IN ISFAHAN, IRAN**

**Kouros Samanian**

*University of Art, Sarhang Sakhaei St., Hafez St., Tehran, Iran*

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*Corresponding author: samanian\_k@yahoo.com*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sukias House is one of the Armenian noble houses located in New Julfa Neighbourhood in Isfahan city in Iran and belongs to the Safavid period (1501-1736 AD).

European itineraries who visited Isfahan in 16th and 17th centuries, existed literatures and conservation reports on the Armenian buildings in New Julfa particularly on Sukias house in conjunction with condition survey and in situ examination of the paintings were the main tools to study the Sukias House and its paintings.

This indicates a strong connection of the house to Armenian and English people at the time of the paintings and support idea of the involvement of the British ambassador and his Armenian translator in building of Sukias House. The existence of English and Armenian inscriptions indicates a strong connection between Armenian and English people in decorating of the house using wall painting. In addition, the depicting of Queen Elizabeth in a tableau on the external walls increases the likelihood of this house having belonged to the English ambassador in Isfahan during the Safavid period. Alternatively, it may be that English people working in Isfahan for the East India Company lived there.

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**KEYWORDS:** Safavid period (1501-1736 AD), Sukias House, New Julfa, European itineraries, British-Armenian link, wall paintings, Iran-Isfahan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Armenian group which moved into Isfahan, under the orders of King Abbas I in 1604 AD, started to construct a new town near the city, calling it New Julfa. The king supported them with commercial concessions and opportunities for communication. His generosity attracted other Armenians to Isfahan and their population increased. Their skills grew and they quickly obtained important status in Iranian society. This led to the establishment of new areas of New Julfa. (Bournoutian 2008)

These Armenians were stonemasons, so the area was called Sangtarashha (stonemasons). The quarter of Tabriziha was built in Sangtarashha in the second part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by order of King Abbas II and a new group of Armenian immigrants moved there. New Julfa became a suburb of Isfahan after the Safavid period because of the expansion of the city (Carswell, 1986, 3-15). Sukias House, the location of the case study reported in this paper, is one of the most noble buildings in New Julfa. It has wall paintings using both the traditional Persian technique of tempera and that of oil painting, which was introduced to Iranian artists in the Safavid period under European influence.

The few publications on the Armenian houses and conservation of their murals, particularly those in Sukias House, can be categorised as follows:

1. 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, European itineraries.
2. 1968 AD, John Carswell's book on the Armenian building in New Julfa. (Carswell, 1986)
3. 1974 AD, Report of the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (IsMEO). (Karapetian, 1974, 119-132)
4. 1977 AD, Annual report of conservation works by the Technical Office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, Isfahan Centre. (Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, 1977)

5. 1997-8 AD, Student projects: Undergraduate and graduate dissertations of students mainly in conservation courses at the Art University in Tehran and Isfahan University of Art.

Itineraries were written in the Safavid period by European merchants, military people, ambassadors and excursionists, describing and introducing the paintings of the Safavid period and the artistic elements used by some of its artists. For instance, Jean Chardin (1643-1713 AD) was a European visitor who described Isfahan and its buildings very well (see Table 1). Such resources were put on public view in European museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There can be no serious study of the itineraries of visitors to Iran during the Safavid period without mentioning the name of Isfahan and its historic monuments.

Due to the location of New Julfa, an Armenian settlement on the outskirts of Isfahan, during the Safavid period, the political and religious importance of immigration in the creation of commercial relations, and the distribution of Christians and Europeans, there is valuable information about Armenians in all reports of European travellers. This could be as a result of the closeness of religious between European travellers and the Armenians, who formed a Christian minority in Isfahan which European travellers would have been interested in visiting.

However, the reports of European visitors to Isfahan during the Safavid period are particularly good sources of information on the condition of Isfahan, and its monuments and wall paintings in that period. As Arnold points out, the Safavid kings often "*decorated their palaces with frescoes, but it was not until European travellers began to describe them that we came to know much about them.*" (Arnold 1965, 27)

The earliest research into Armenian houses in Isfahan identified during this study is that of Carswell (1968 AD), who describes Sukias House (House "A") in three

pages. This can be considered the first documented attempt to describe the characteristics of Armenian houses and paintings in New Julfa. (Carswell, 1986) He starts with the historical background of Armenian immigration into Isfahan and the support given by King Abbas for them to construct the new Julfa neighbourhood, then he describes some of the surviving Armenian houses in New Julfa, including the architecture of Sukias House and the current state of the building. Carswell mentions the European influence on the paintings and the representation of Persian, Dutch, British and Armenian customs in the paintings of this and other contemporary houses. (Carswell, 1986, ) The content of this research will be referred to in the current where necessary.

A group of IsMEO conservators collaborated with Iranian conservators on wall paintings of the Safavid Palaces and houses in the 1960s and 1970s. Mora et al (1984 AD) provide some information on the conservation of murals in Chehel-Sotoon palace, completed by Agajani. (Mora et al. 1984, 76) Unfortunately, the only published work is the IsMEO report and two papers by H. Agajani regarding wall paintings of the Safavid houses and palaces in Isfahan. The IsMEO report of 1974 AD refers to Sukias House as "House of Sukas". ( Karapetian, 1974) This publication is important because it presents a conservation view of Sukias House, describing its condition at that time in terms of conservation and restoration issues. The Technical Office of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (Isfahan Centre) issues regular annual reports on conservation and restoration activities affecting the cultural heritage of Isfahan. The 1977 report describes the condition of Sukias House immediately after its purchase on behalf of the Art University and a list of conservation and restoration work completed on the house by the Technical Office.

Khalil Khazaei (Khazaei, 1997), Afshin Ebrahimi (Ebrahimi, 1998) and Mehdi Ja-

hangiri (Jahangiri, 1998), Atefeh Shekoufeh (Shekofte, 2006) as conservation students at the Isfahan Art University worked on Sukias House for their final projects. These are examples of students projects on paintings of Sukias House. Of the mentioned projects on Sukias House murals, just two (Ebrahimi 1998, Shekofte, 2006) concerns the exterior wall paintings in oils, while the other two concern practical conservation work on the interior tempera murals. (Khazaei, 1997 and Jahangiri, 1998)

In Shekofte's study, pigments were analyzed by wet chemical methods and restoration was carried out on one tableau.

In Ebrahimi's study, pigments were analyzed by wet chemical methods and restoration was carried out on one tableau.

The nature of the binding medium, oil and other materials in the layered structure of these paintings was not clearly identified in this project. The only work of this kind carried out was an attempt at using a chemical method of interaction of sodium hydroxide with triglyceride and chloridic acid to verify the binder as oil-based without referring to any particular binder or named oil as being used as binding media and drying oils. (Ebrahimi 1998, 107-108) This was because a wet chemical method (the interaction of chemical solvents with samples) is not a sufficiently powerful technique to verify the type of binding medium or oil used. Ebrahimi admitted to his failure to identify the binding medium and oil, emphasising the difficulties involved and the need for sophisticated modern methods to meet this aim. (Ebrahimi 1998, 89-90)

The practical work done on one tableau consisted of documentation, cleaning and primarily fixing the tableau with 3% Paraloid B.72 solution using a spray method designed to be reversible, the restoration of holes and coloured layers by watercolours with a binding solution of gum Arabic in water, and the covering of the tableau with a 6% Paraloid B. 72 solution. (Ebrahimi 1998, 149-177)

A number of shortcomings can be identified in the work reported by Ebrahimi. First, there was no consideration of the context of the exterior oil paintings as a whole, nor of the relation between the damage they had suffered and environmental factors. In addition, there was a failure to identify the binding medium and oil used, perhaps because instrumental analysis was not used; as noted above, Ebrahimi states the necessity of applying modern analysis techniques. The present research seeks to fill these gaps in our understanding of these tableaux, in addition to identifying context of the paintings of Sukias House. The relation between the damage they had suffered and environ-

mental factors and the used material and technique are topics of forthcoming papers by the author.

## 2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

All the above named documents along with condition survey and in situ study of the paintings were used for doing this research. For this reason the most important and famous itineraries of European visitors to Isfahan in the Safavid period examined in this research. The list of investigated itineraries is listed in table1 as follow:

Present condition of Sukias house has compared with events and descriptions of safavid houses based on European itiner-

<b>Traveller</b>	<b>Visited Iran</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Position</b>
George Tectander (?) (Tectander, trans. Tafazoli 1973)	1603-1604 AD	German	Messenger of Rudolf II
Pietro Della Valle (1586-1652 AD) (Della valle, trans. Shafa, 1970)	1618-1624 AD	Italian	Traveller
Don Garcia de Silva y Figuera (Figuera, trans. Samiei, 1985)	1618 AD	Spanish	Ambassador
Adam Olearius (ca.1603-1671 AD) (Olearius, trans. Behpour, 1986)	1637 AD	German	Scholar
Jean Chardin (1643-1713 AD) (Chardin, trans. Yaghmaei, 1997)	1664-1680 AD	French	Jeweller, trader
Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605-1689 AD) (Tavernier, trans: Noori, 1958)	1632-1668 AD	French	Trader
André Daulier-Deslandes (1621-1715 AD) (Daulier-Deslandes, trans. Saba, 1968)	1664 AD	French	Traveller
Engelbert Kämpfer (1651-1716 AD) (Kämpfer, trans. Jahandari, 1980)	1684 AD	German	Doctor
Nicolas Sanson (1600-1667 AD) (Sanson, trans. Tafazoli 1981)	1683 AD	French	Christian propagandist
Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri (1651-1725 AD) (Careri, trans. Karang, 1970)	1694-1695 AD	Italian	Traveller
Jan Smith (Smith, trans. and ed. Floor, 1978)	1629 AD	Dutch	Ambassador
Cornelius de Bruyn (1652-1726 AD) (De Bruyn, 1737)	1703 AD	Dutch	Artist
Petros di Sarkis Gilanentz (?-1724 AD) (Gilanentz, Mehryar 1992)	?	Armenian	Translator
Judasz Tadeusz Krusinski (1675-1756) (Krusinski, Denbeli, 1985)	1707-1725 AD	Polish	Clergyman

Sherley Brothers: Sir Anthony (1565-1635 AD) and Sir Robert (1581-1628 AD)	?	English	Military Officers
Thomas Herbert (1606-1682 AD) (Herbert, ed.Foster, 1928)	1628 AD	English	Traveller

aries. In addition, context and archaeological aspects of the paintings investigated through condition survey, inscriptions and ethnographical point of view on the paintings. This is to discover unknown archaeological aspects of the paintings and answering art historical questions during a conservation research in order to form subsequent technical research on the paintings. In addition, the author has written a paper on ambitious aspects of used material and techniques which is under review for publication purpose.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Armenians and the New Julfa Neighbourhood in Isfahan

Armenians are one of the rare immigrant societies who have played an important and outstanding role in Iranian society. They adapted themselves very soon to the new environment, while maintaining their traditions, including language, religion and culture. This was the result of the special support of King Abbas I and his court and of the subsequent efforts and activities of Armenians in Iran. Armenians played a very effective role in the development and modernising of Iran, particularly in industry and art, specific examples being photography, cinema, publishing and printing. (Bournoutian 2008)

According to Gray, Persian and Armenian month-names are influenced by the Zoroastrian Avesta calendar of ancient Persia (Gray, 1907, 331-334). Most Armenians are Greek orthodox Christians.

Once Armenians had settled in new Julfa and grown rich, King Abbas I supported them by granting trading privileges, a mo-

nopoly on the silk trade and interest-free loans. (Bournoutian 2008) *"The New Julfa merchants formed trading companies, which competed with the Levant, East India, and Muscovy companies, and established businesses in Kabul, Herat, Qandahar, Marseilles, Venice, Genoa, Moscow, and Amsterdam, and in cities of Sweden, Poland, Germany, India, China, Indonesia, and the Philippines."* (Bournoutian 2008) When they became wealthy, they began to decorate their homes with wall paintings. Jan Smith (? AD) refers, in 1629, to the architecture and decoration of their "very beautiful houses". (Smith, trans. and ed. Floor, 1978, 82) New Julfa is located south of Isfahan on a tributary of the Zayande Rood (Zayanderoud) River. Tavernier states that it was half an hour on foot or two miles from the city. (Tavernier, trans. Noori, 1958, 393)

According to Chardin, "Julfa is the perhaps the greatest suburb of any of the world's cities". He describes it as covering an area equivalent to six square kilometres "beside a wide river". (Chardin, trans. Yaghmaei, 1997, 1567) This expression might be a little ambitious for today, but its size as a suburb in the Safavid period is remarkable.

In 1606, King Abbas I (1588-1629 AD) permitted Armenians to reside across the banks of Zayande Rood temporarily as guests and then transferred ownership of the lands to the new residents, who named it in memory of the town of Julfa on the Aras river in Armenia. New Julfa may be divided into two parts (old and new). (Chardin, trans. Yaghmaei, 1997, 1567) It developed most rapidly during the time of King Abbas II. This was simultaneous with the order to expel Armenians from Isfahan city and transfer them to New Julfa.

Hashemi quote Persian translation of an inscription in the Holy Sargis church, Amna Perkij (The rescuer of all people), located in Iravans' Alley (Yerevan quarter) in the New Julfa, follow is its English translation:

*"King Abbas I [1588-1629 AD] has taken us and brought to a foreign land. They took us to a foreign land from Arara and also Tarom and Khalkhal and Ahar and Meshkin. After the end of winter they delivered us to a city by the name of Isfahan in spring. We resided beside Narin Ghale and constructed a church and different houses there. We named the place Amna Perkij. By the grace of God we were able to enjoy it until the time of the next King Abbas [king Abbas II 1642-1667 AD]. About 51 years after that again God showed his kindness to Armenians and the King ordered the separation of Armenians from Moslems and accommodated them beside Zayande Rood [Giving Birth River] in a suitable place. We established beautiful houses, gardens there at the time of great clergyman David in 1656."* (Arabi Hashemi, 1999, 69)

Arakel states that all Armenians left the city centre in 1659 and were accommodated in new alleys of New Julfa. Now, the only place of permanent residence for Armenians was Julfa, (Arabi Hashemi, 1999, 69) which Andre Daulie Deslandes (1621-1715 AD) describes as follows:

*"There are two major streets through the city. Besides them there are plane trees watered by a small river. The small river may go to other alleys and then it is used for irrigation of gardens. There is no alley on one side without the said trees. All buildings in Julfa are similar to Isfahan and most of them are really clean."* (Daulier-Deslandes, trans. Saba, 1968, 67)

Adam Olearius provides a more detailed description of this area:

*"Julfa is the most important and beautiful settlement near Isfahan with about 3,000 houses and 12 churches. Its people pay about 200 tomans [This amount for the Safavid period is high. Rial is the currency of Iran. one Toman is equal to ten Rials.] to the King in tax. Sefras Beik collects these taxes and grants to the king through Khosro Soltan. A second*

*smaller area of Isfahan is Tabriz Abad, also called Abbas Abad. Its people have made King Abbas [I (1588-1629 AD)] leave Tabriz for Isfahan. The third part of the city is Hussein Abad, the residence of Georgians who have migrated from Gorjistan to Isfahan. They are known as carpenters and have travelled to many foreign countries to trade, like the Armenians".* (Olearius, trans. Kordbacheh 1986, 614)

This shows that Georgians also played an important role in the Safavid period; but whereas today there is still a distinct quarter where Armenian continue to live, there is no longer any sign of a Georgian population. This may be because the latter had a similar language and culture to the Persians and became more easily blended into Persian society. However, Hussein Abad neighbourhood still is existed near Julfa.

Pietro Della Valle, writing in 1617 AD, compared Julfa with the nearby quarter of Gabrs, which he described as "more beautiful than Julfa" and better built, although the houses were more modest, because the people were poor farmers with little income. (Della valle, trans. Shafa, 1970, 78) Tavernier describes the road from Isfahan to Julfa as "most beautiful and excellent". (Tavernier, trans: Noori, 1958, 393) He also refers to "two major streets running the length of Julfa, one of which is decorated by plane trees on both sides with a river below them [which the] Armenians may use to irrigate their gardens. [...] All the houses in Julfa are more beautiful and interesting than those of Isfahan". (Tavernier, trans: Noori, 1958, 400) Kämpfer (1651-1716 AD) considered the Julfa suburbs excellent because of the width and length of the streets in 1684 AD. (Kämpfer, trans. Jahandari, 1980, 186)

Another European visitor, Gemelli Careri described the green gardens of Julfa in 1694 AD. (Careri, trans. Karang, 1970, 99) He explained that the exterior of each house was modest, while the interior was beautifully decorated. The avenues were straight, well-ordered and cleaner than those of Isfahan, with two rows of plane trees and a river in

the middle (Careri, trans. Karang, 1970, 99).

Julfa retained its beauty in subsequent centuries. Isfahani states in his *Brief History of Isfahan* that “it is one of the best parts of the city from the point of view of clean air and water [...] with trees and plants [...] new shops and excellent churches...” (Nadimol Molk Isfahani 1926, 150). Unfortunately, more recent construction work has somewhat spoiled the beauty and originality of its open spaces and buildings.

### 3.2 Armenian painters

The IsMEO report mentions that the paintings placed on the ivan (veranda) walls of Sukias House (the exterior walls) show a European influence and on the basis of John Carswell’s idea, the paintings show particular Dutch and English traits. While Pakbaz also sees the clear influence of Holland on the wall paintings of New Julfa, (Pakbaz, 2005, 134) Ghazarian mentions the influence of Spanish and Italian artists on them. (Ghazarian, 1984) Some scholars have suggested that they were done by Armenian and European painters who learnt this technique in Europe and came to Iran in the Safavid period. (Ghazarian, 1984) Both Persian and European dress is seen in these paintings. A study by Ebrahimi comparing the dress styles shows that the paintings were influenced by the cultures of England, France and the Netherlands more than other countries.

The IsMEO report also notes that a Dutch scholar believed that the paintings had been influenced by England, not the Netherlands. (Karapetian, 1974, 119-132) This idea refers to the result of Ebrahimi’s project, verifying the second theory, because he mentions the effects of England more than those of Netherlands in the paintings. His statement based on comparing dress customs of figures in paintings with contemporary European dress style in different countries in that time. He found that the dressing style of figures in the paintings is representing

much more English dress customs in the time. (Ebrahimi, 1998)

There is some evidence of Armenian painters who were working in the Safavid period, such as Minas, a master who learned painting in Halab (it is known as Aleppo which is a city in northern Syria) from a European teacher and who, upon returning to New Julfa, decorated the houses of rich Armenians with wall paintings. These had a strong European—and especially Dutch—influence. (Carswell, 1968, 25-29) According to Chardin, an Armenian merchant called Avadick travelled to Italy and when he returned urged priests to let him paint the walls of cathedrals. (Chardin, trans. Yaghmaei, 1997, 1568) As these were simply decorated, the only images being those of Mary and Jesus above the altar, Avadick’s repeated requests annoyed the priests. Eventually, they let him decorate a cathedral, but regretted this decision when Moslems gathered in large numbers to enjoy the paintings. Chardin adds that at the time of his visit to Isfahan, the priests had met several times to discuss the removal of the paintings, but to avoid disappointing Moslems abandoned the idea. (Chardin, trans. Yaghmaei, 1997, 1568)

Greenwood and Vardanyan (2006 AD) have recently discovered that an Armenian artist, Hakob Jughayets’i, who worked in Isfahan at the start of the seventeenth century and died there in 1613 AD, was well-known for his manuscript illustrations, and also painted murals or frescoes. (Greenwood and Vardanyan 2006) A colophon describes him as a “decorator of houses”. This aspect of his artistic career was completely unknown. It may be that other 17th-century Armenian manuscript illuminators were also painters of murals. The tradition of lavish decoration of Armenian merchants’ houses in Isfahan is well attested. Moreover, the possibility of western influence via Armenian artists who were drawing on western models in manuscript illumination at the time is very attractive. (Greenwood, 2007).

Among the very few articles published in the early and middle twentieth century on the materials used in Persian painting were those by Farooqi (Farooqi, 1977) and Laurie (Laurie, 1935). The most significant published sources from this recent period are those by Purinton and Watters (Purinton and Watters, 1991), Bruni and colleagues (Bruni et al., 2001), Hayez et al. (Hayez et al., 2004) and Clark and Mirabaud (Clark and Mirabaud 2006). However, Ebrahimi (Ebrahimi, 1998) and Shekofte (Shekofte, 2006) have mentioned a list of identified pigments as result of wet chemical methods. (See table 2).

#### 4. SUKIAS (SUKIASIAN) HOUSE

Sukias House is located in the Tabriziha district of New Julfa and registered as number 994 in the list of Iranian national historic monuments. Silva Figuera, writing in 1618 AD, was impressed by the richness and beauty of the Armenian houses. (Figueroa, trans Samiei, 1985, 223) Chardin reports that at the time of his stay in Isfahan, from 1665 to 1677 AD, there were some 3,400 to 3,500 houses in New Julfa, the grandest of which, built along the river, he describes as "like royal palaces." (Chardin, trans. Yaghmaei, 1997, 1569). Later on, in 1704 AD, Cornelius de Bruyn (1652-1726 AD) referred to a number of beautiful houses of Armenians residing in Julfa, including those of Khaje Minas, Khaje Haigaz, Lokas, Erjit Agha, Khaje Sararaz, Khaje Agamat, Khaje Avans and Khaje Mersa. He describes these as having beautiful galleries with decorated tableaux and great balconies. The houses are described as being furnished with beautiful carpets and chairs decorated with gold and silver. The front entrances, according to de Bruyn (1652-1726 AD), were intentionally small in order to prevent armed attack and to keep the wealth of the occupants from public view. ( De Bruyn, 1737, 324-5)

Unfortunately it is not clear where these houses were located, whether they survive

today and whether Sukias House could be one of them, particularly since it was given its present name in the 20th century because of the family name of the last owner. It could be that Sukias House was one of the above houses, but this cannot be proved, as there is no detailed information about each specific house; de Bruyn's description is a general one of the Armenian houses. One thing that is clear is that the above list of names includes those of some painters, such as Minas (ca. 1615-1680 AD) and Lokas (? AD) as two Armenian painters during the Safavid period. (Pakbaz, 2000)

On the other hand, it is possible that in the following passage Olearius (ca.1603-1671 AD) is describing the appearance of Sukias House in the Safavid period; if so, it is probably the oldest description of this house.

*"After lunch... they led us into a hall, whose arched ceiling was decorated very artistically. The walls were painted with tableaux depicting female clothing and customs of different nations and there was a marble pool in the central area of the hall..."*

(Olearius, trans. Behpour, 1986, 205)

While Olearius (ca.1603-1671 AD) does not state whether it is Sukias House or a similar one to which he refers (because at that time the name of Sukias was not applied to the house), his description is very similar to that of the central building of Sukias House. However, this is the only document among the itineraries investigated for this study which describes a property similar to Sukias House.

Farah Pahlavi, wife of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran before the Islamic revolution of 1978 AD, owned Sukias House between 1973 and 1976 AD. It then became part of the Conservation Faculty of the Art University of Isfahan in 1977 AD. It was at that time in bad condition, having fallen into disuse during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979 AD).



Sukias house, which was purchased from Soren Sukasian, Markar Soukasian, Zaman-dokht Sukias, Mehdi Mesripoor and Robabeh Mesripoor, was separated into four parts in its ownership document. (Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, 1977)

The IsMEO report states that one David Sukas was the earliest known owner of the house and this appears to be the origin of the present name. Indeed, the name Sukias House was not used before the IsMEO report in 1974 AD, where it is referred to as "House of Sukas". (Karapetian, 1974, 124) Today it is known as Sukias House or Sukiasian House.

The date of Sukias House is not exactly clear and there is no documentary or other certain evidence from which to date it. Ahmad Rahbari discovered 23 mementos (signature or/and date) in the house and dated the oldest at 1712 AD, (Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization, 1977) which suggests that the house is likely to be many years older than this, assuming that mementos (inscriptions) were added to the building at least few years later.

Further evidence is provided by Carswell, who quotes a verbal report by an Armenian artist, Apraham Gourgenian that the house was built in 1655 by an Armenian translator for the British ambassador. He also notes that this man and his wife are depicted in the main hall of the house. The nature of pigments is not mentioned as there is no information or technical report on identification of used material and techniques. (Carswell, 1986, 65) (See Figure 4).

Finally, the IsMEO report refers to a portrait of King Abbas I in the central room, suggesting that this was painted during his reign, since his permission would have been required to represent his figure at that time. IsMEO also suggests that the carved stucco panels in the house might be dated, like those in the Hasht Behesht palace, to the reign of King Soleiman (1667-1694 AD). (Karapetian, 1974, 125)

Taking the above evidence into account,

considering the form of the various paintings and architectural features and bearing in mind that decorative patterns are likely to have been added to the building some years after its main structure was built, the date of construction of Sukias House would appear to be between 1600-1655 AD.

#### *4.1 Condition survey and Description of the building*

Sukias House, which was constructed between a northern and a southern courtyard, has an area of about 2750 m<sup>2</sup>. Its architecture is in the style of a pavilion—a form of traditional Persian architecture consisting of a central building with a surrounding garden and yard—and the building was apparently used during the spring and summer seasons, as indicated by the open view to the north and by the central pool with fountain in the main hall. The central building is surrounded by the southern and northern courtyards and is situated in the middle of a large garden.

This construction includes a large and long yard and some spaces in both southern and northern front's sites. The southern front site is adjacent to another yard. The ground floor has a two-column veranda which faces a pool. Two three-door rooms are located adjacent to the main courtyard of the house, on either side of the veranda. Behind each of these is another room, connected to the second courtyard.

The building has two floors, on each of which there are several rooms. On the second floor, these rooms are joined together and surround the central part of the pool. The pool area is visible from the columned veranda through a high Oresi—a traditional Iranian type of window which opens from bottom to top—and is open to the southern courtyard through three wooden doors. (See Figure 1)

It seems that this window was added to the building many years after its construction, as part of the wall paintings are cov-

ered by the edges of the window. The reason may be that the house was originally intended for use during the summer season and was later adapted for winter use; the owner presumably decided to install the window to keep out the cold weather.

The pool's surrounding chambers are decorated with *karbandi*, a traditional Iranian geometric design often used to decorate façades, and paintings depicting European people, western scenes and subjects. The columned veranda at the front has abundant decorations (on its ceiling and walls.

The room to the eastern side of the pool has holes and resembling the upper part of the Ali Ghapoo Palace in Isfahan. This technique, which is called *toungbouri* (a kind of Persian cut-stucco decoration), plays an acoustic role in Safavid buildings. (Nikzad, 1975, 373)

The northern façade has an asymmetrical form, incorporating a columned veranda and back rooms including the kitchen and entrance parts. The entrance vestibule has a square floor plan and is connected to the

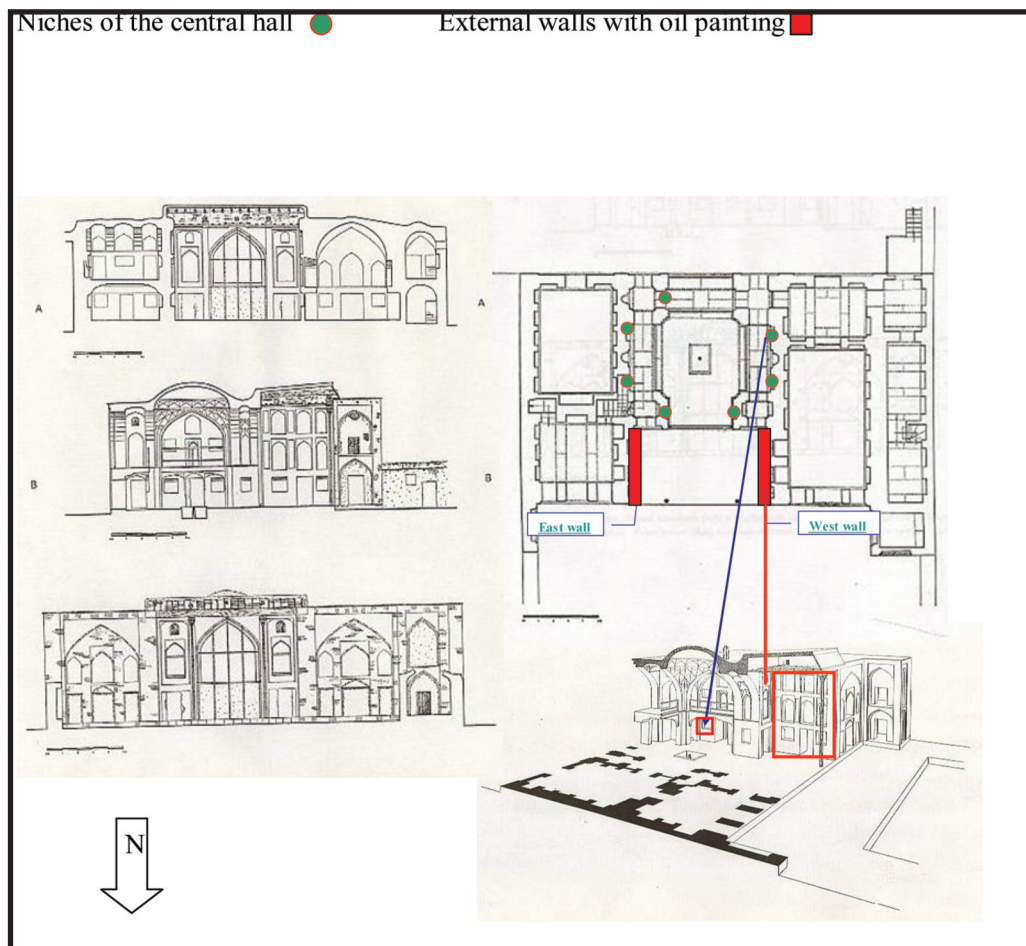


Figure 1. Plan and perspective of Sukias House

Source of plans: IsMEO report, Rome 1974. Coloured lines and text added by author to clarify location of exterior wall painting

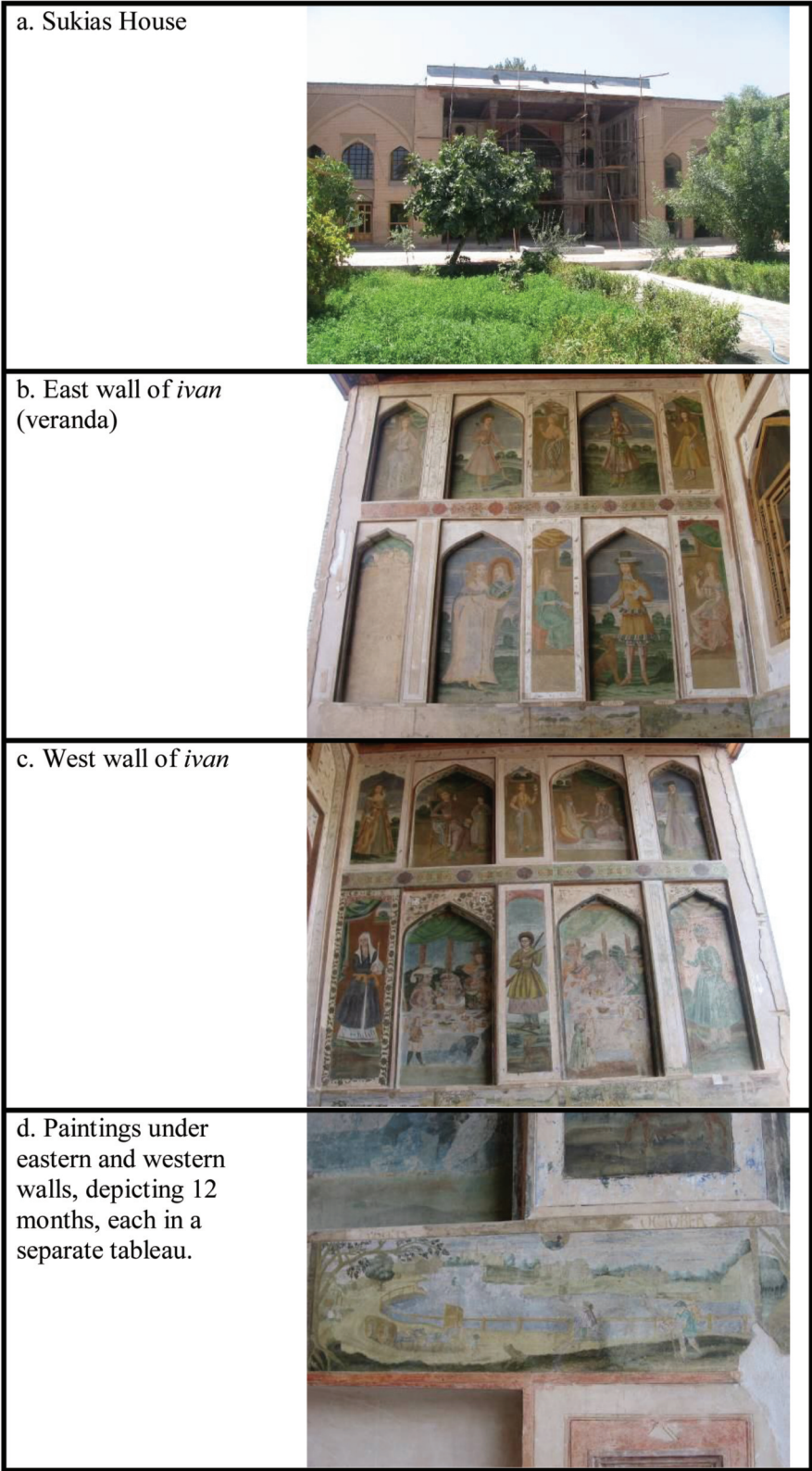


Figure 2. Safavid wall paintings in Sukias House

courtyard by a corridor which also links it to the kitchen. The building is differentiated from the adjacent houses by the use of *yazdibandi* (a kind of Persian geometric design) to decorate the entrance and the surrounding false arches on the façade. Today this entrance is closed, because the room behind it is used as a laboratory for students of conservation science at the Art University of Isfahan. There is another small entrance on the west wing of the building.

The outside of the house is covered in *sim gel*, a mixture of straw and clay containing iron dioxide, which gives it its red colour. A mixture of clay and straw has also been used to insulate the roof, following a traditional technique from the Safavid period. The clay particles expand when they absorb water and the straw acts as filler, making connections between clay particles. There is also some added salt, for anti-pest purposes. This kind of insulation has to be replaced every few years, as heavy rains wash this plaster away. (Aghajani, 2001)

#### *4.2 Condition survey and description of paintings*

As mentioned before, Sukias House is a valuable case study for the better understanding of oil paintings in the Safavid period. Figure 2a shows the interior of the courtyard, while images b and c illustrate paintings on the external eastern and western walls. Figure 2d shows the lower part of the major tableaux of the western wall.

The two main techniques used to produce wall paintings in Sukias House and all other Safavid buildings are *tempera* and *oils*. All the *tempera* paintings are found on the interior walls of the central room, while most of the oil paintings are located on the exterior western and eastern walls of the *ivan* (a large traditional Persian veranda).

Thus, Sukias House has both interior and exterior paintings, the former using both *tempera* and oil techniques, while the latter are all painted in oils.

It is possible to categorise the internal paintings of Sukias House according to location and distance from ground level, as follows:

1. Paintings at high level (two metres above the ground) (Figure 3a).
2. Decorative paintings on columns and their decorative parts (Figure 3b).
3. Different tableaux at lower levels and inside the shelves (up to two metres from the ground) (Figure 3c).

There are two great tableaux on the higher level of the central hall. One of them, at the western end, depicts a man with a gun and a dog (see Figure 4a), while the other, at the eastern end next to the great window, shows a woman with an apple in her hand (see Figure 4b). Both images have the European form and style with European technique, clothes and personages; in other words, they are completely European in style and content. Thus, they represent the most advanced European influence on the wall paintings of Sukias House.

Regarding the style, system of work and professional standard of drawing of the above-mentioned tableaux, several important points can be made. The first is the situation of the paintings and the use of oils in a mixed Eastern and Western style, which suggests that the two tableaux are very important and probably depict the owner of the house at the time and his wife.

According to John Carswell, these could be images of the English ambassador and his wife, for whom Sukias was built in 1655 by his Armenian translator. . (Carswell, 1986, 65) The painter may be assumed to have been personally obliged to perform the task or to have assigned it to other painters under his supervision.

By considering the current tableaux on the internal shelves of Sukias House, it is clear that they have taken the step of transferring the *tempera* technique to oil paintings.

This is because *tempera* is used in one of the shelves, as is obvious in Figure 5, while

the lower part of the shelf, which is covered with gypsum, bears an image with a European scene and subject painted in oils. (see Figure 5)

Table 2 lists the colours and pigments identified in the Sukias House paintings by conservation students at Isfahan Art University. In Ebrahimi's project, chemical analysis of the pigments showed that they probably contained: malachite ( $\text{Cu CO}_3$ ,  $\text{Cu(OH)}_2$ ) as a green pigment; lead white ( $2\text{Pb CO}_3$ ,  $\text{Pb(OH)}_2$ ) as a white pigment; lajward (lapis lazuli) ( $\text{Na}_{4-10} \text{Al}_6 \text{Si}_4 \text{O}_{24} \text{S}_{2-4}$ ) as a blue pigment; and ochre (hydrated iron

oxide  $\text{Fe}_2 \text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NH}_2\text{O}$ ) as brown and red pigments. (Ebrahimi 1998, 92-96) In Shekofte's project, chemical analysis of the pigments showed that they probably contained: malachite ( $\text{Cu CO}_3$ ,  $\text{Cu(OH)}_2$ ) as a green pigment; lead white ( $2\text{Pb CO}_3$ ,  $\text{Pb(OH)}_2$ ) as a white pigment; ochre (hydrated iron oxide  $\text{Fe}_2 \text{O}_3$ ,  $\text{NH}_2\text{O}$ ) as red pigment and umbra as brown pigment. She has stated the wet chemical tests failed to identify blue and yellow pigments but mentioned that the nature of blue pigment is a kind of organic pigment. (Shekofte 2006, 24-25)

**Table 2: Results of pigment analysis of Sukias House wall paintings by students at the Art University, Isfahan**

Colours	Pigments (Ebrahimi' results)	Pigments (Shekofte' results)
Green	Malachite	Malachite
Blue	Lajward ((lapis lazuli)	Organic
Red	Iron oxide (ochre)	Ochre
Yellow	?	Unknown
Brown	Iron oxide (ochre)	Umbra
Black	Carbon Black	?
White	Lead white	Lead white
Gold	Gold	?

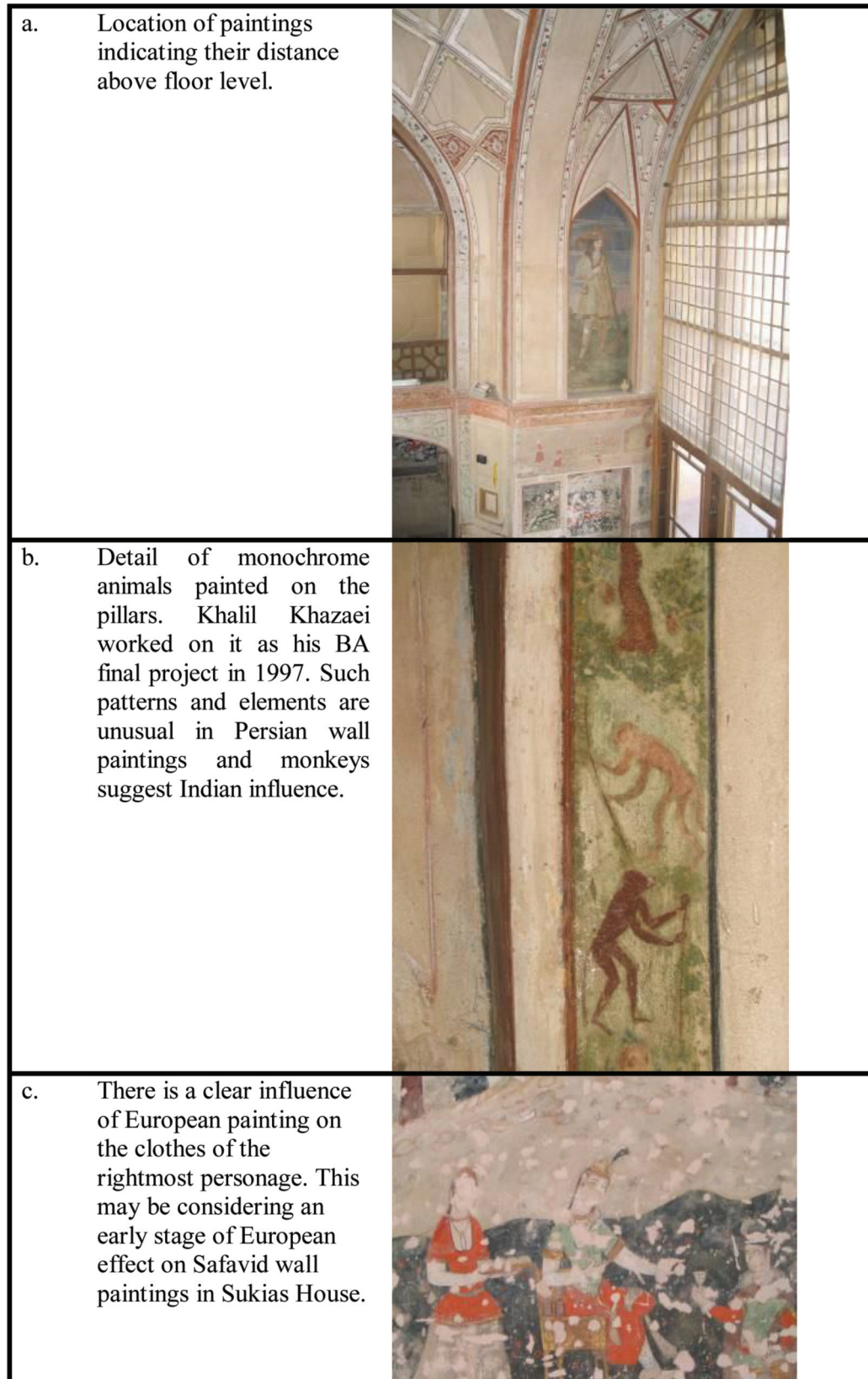


Figure 3. Selected tableaux of interior wall paintings in Sukias House

A. Probably portrait of the owner of Sukias House in the Safavid period. The style, technique and subject of the tableau indicate the influence of Europe on Persian painting. It seems the painter of this tableau and the one below was different from others in Sukias House, because of elaborate and professional work in the tableaux.



a

B. Influence of European elements in Persian wall paintings. Central hall of Sukias House. This is probably a portrait of the wife of the owner of the house in the Safavid period.



b

Figure 4. Portraits of the owner of Sukias House (the British ambassador) and his wife in the Safavid period? Central Hall of Sukias House

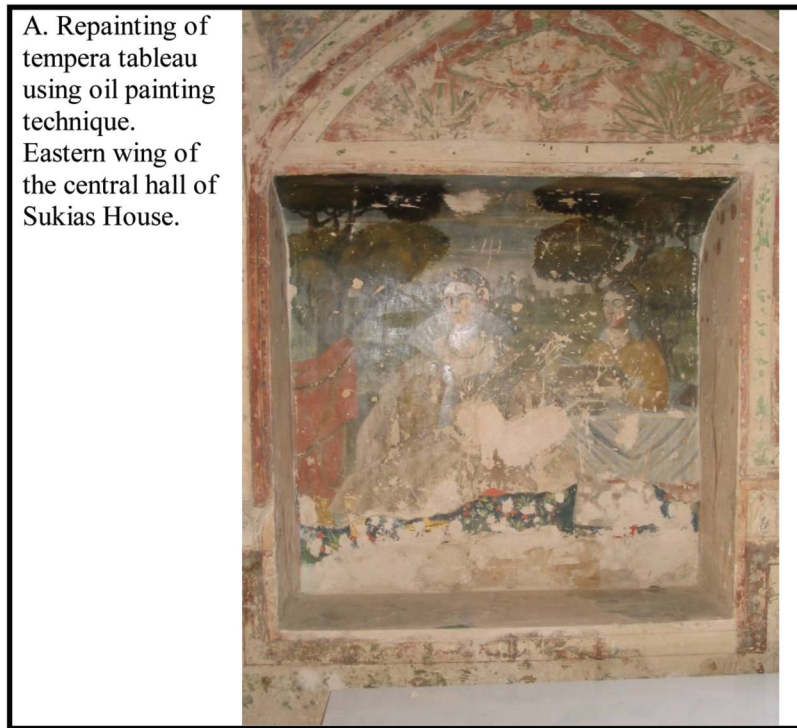


Figure 5. Evidence of changing technique from tempera to oil painting in an interior niche of Sukias House

The other significant point concerning the interior paintings of Sukias House is the existence of axe marks and gouging of the surface of the tempera tableaux in the niches. This may be considered vandalism, but the real reason more likely it represents to be a method of improving adhesion between a new gypsum layer and the previous one. This means that plasterers formed part of the wall with axes, causing damage to old tempera tableaux, in order to provide an irregular surface inside the niches onto which a new layer of gypsum could then be keyed. The holes have now been filled during conservation activities by students of the Faculty of Conservation at the Art University of Isfahan, including the author of this paper.

Fortunately, the exterior oil paintings at Sukias House are located in the upper area, and there are fewer traces of damage by human activity rather than by other factors,

compared with other areas and buildings. This is simply because they are less accessible to vandalism.

The twenty surviving tableaux on the western and eastern walls of Sukias House may be divided into three general groups according to the extent of damage: low, moderate, or high. (see Figure 6) It is notable that those tableaux with low or moderate damage were located towards the centre and the top of the walls, while the extent of damage increased towards the external edge and lower down the walls. In addition to the major tableaux on the eastern and western walls, there is a painted band 40 cm in height below these paintings, consisting of a series of illustrations of the daily life of 15th- and 16th-century Europeans. This band of paintings may be damaged in accordance with the varying environmental conditions across the band.

Close examination of these tableaux re-



vealed some English inscriptions and others, probably in Armenian, above the painted parts. Two of these were recognisable as the words 'October' and 'September' in English. An interesting point concerning the paintings forming this band is that the illustrated scenes fit with the named months; for instance, that headed 'September' represents the weather one would expect in that month. Figure 7 shows different images of the said subject.

The inscriptions in Armenian were more difficult to decipher, partly because of the use of an obsolete alphabet; however, close

examination and consultation with Timothy Greenwood of St. Andrews University revealed a word that translates as 'April'. Greenwood suggests that naming paintings after months is typical of Armenian painters. (Greenwood, 2007) Figure 8 illustrates the procedures used to interpret the said inscription. The significant point is the professional illustration of details in current images within a short length of the band. Therefore, the size of people and tools are very small but with more complete consideration of detail.

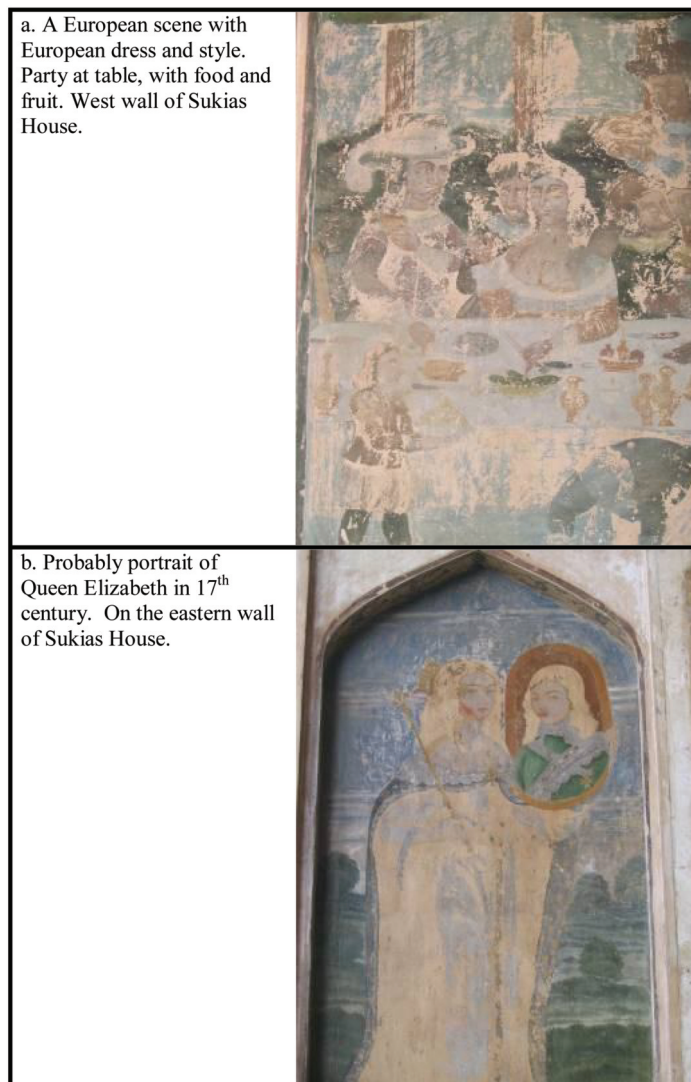


Figure 6. Selected Sukias House tableaux showing extreme damage

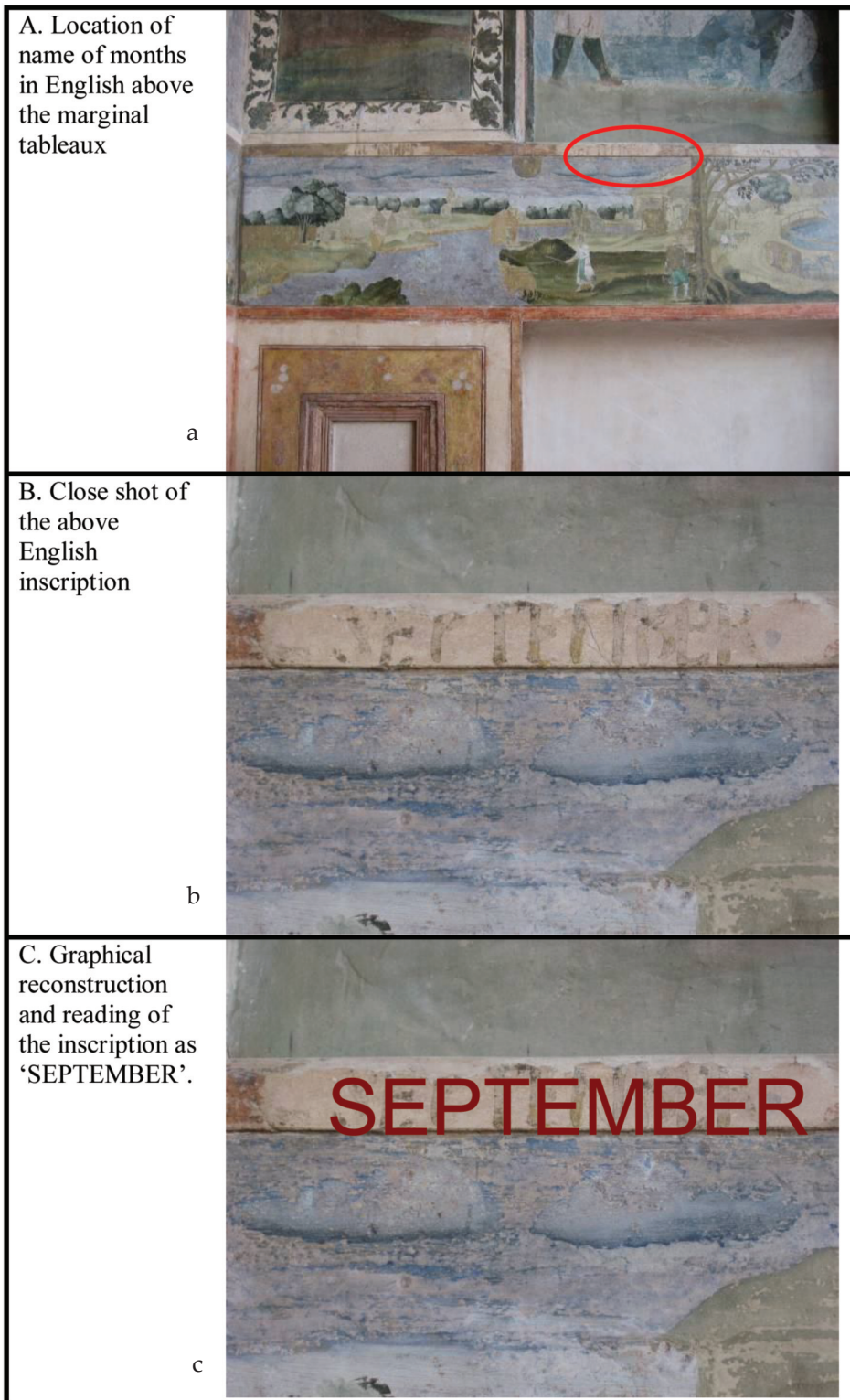


Figure 7. English inscriptions on the marginal area under the main tableaux of exterior paintings at Sukias House, part two.

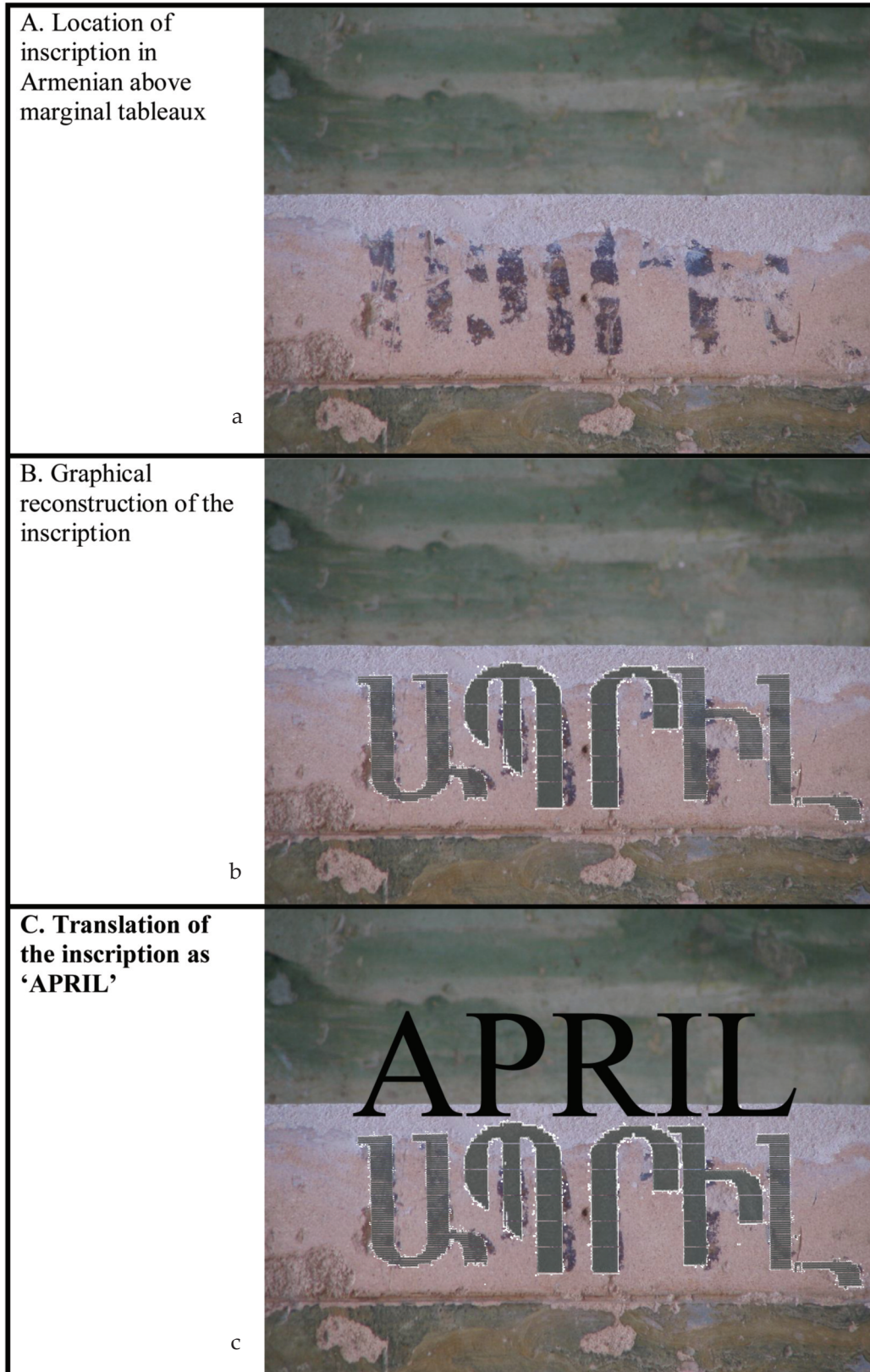


Figure 8. Armenian inscriptions on the margin below the main tableaux of exterior or paintings at Sukias

## 5. CONCLUSION

Based on this research, probably the oldest description of this house is one attributed to a German scholar named Adam Olearius in 1637. While Olearius does not identify Sukias House by name (the name being of 20th century origin), his description is very similar to that of paintings on the external walls and the central building of Sukias House. However, this is the only document among the itineraries investigated for this study which appears to describe the building. Chemical analysis of the pigments showed that they probably contained: malachite as a green pigment; lead white as a white pigment; lajward (lapis lazuli) or an organic material as a blue pigment, so the nature of blue pigment is not clear; and ochre or umbra as brown and/or red pigments and the yellow pigment is unknown (Ebrahimi 1998, 92-96, Shekofte 2006, 24-25) However, Ebrahimi (Ebrahimi, 1998) and Shekofte (Shekofte, 2006) have mentioned a list of identified pigments as result of wet chemical methods. Their results are different as shown in table 2. Hence, a research on used material and techniques has carried out by the author and is under review for publication as this paper is on context and archaeological aspects of the paintings.

The date of construction of Sukias House would appear to be circa 1600-1655. Two large paintings among those examined in the case study depict a European man and woman. John Carswell quotes an Armenian artist, Apraham Gourgenian, as stating that these figures could be images of the English ambassador and his wife, for whom Sukias House was built in 1655 by his Armenian translator. . (Carswell, 1986, 65) According to Wright, the first British envoy to Persia was Geoffrey de Langley, sent by Edward I to seek aid in the fight against the Ottomans in 1290. (Wright, 2001, 2) Then Robert and Anthony Shirley visited the Safavid court as military attachés. In 1569 Sir Anthony Jenk-

inson visited the court of King Tahmasb in Qazvin. In 1573 Edward and Richard Watts were successful in convincing the Persian king to allow British merchants to run businesses in Iran. Sir Dodmore Cotton was among a British mission during the Safavid period, in 1628. (Wright, 2001, 2) In 1615, from its Indian base at Surat, the East India Company sent Richard Steel and John Crowther to Persia to investigate trading possibilities, particularly the market for English broadcloth and the availability of silk as a return cargo. Edward Connock obtained from the Shah in August 1617 an order providing for the permanent residence at the Persian court of an English ambassador, as well as for the dispatch of a Persian ambassador to the English court. (Wright, 2008) Connock was selected as chief factor for a pioneering Persian venture, but he died in 1617 in the village of Gatan. (Marsh, 2008) In 1622 the first British settlement was established by the East India Company, (Wright, 2008) which, acting on behalf of the Governor General of India, represented the British in Iran during the 18th century.

During the condition survey at the Sukias House site, close examination of the paintings revealed some English and Armenian inscriptions. Two of these were recognisable as the words 'October' and 'September' in English and one of them as the Armenian word for 'April'. This indicates a strong connection of the house to Armenian and English people at the time of the paintings and corroborates the suggestion of Apraham Gourgenian concerning the involvement of the British ambassador and his Armenian translator in building Sukias House. It is also possible that Armenians may have had very close links with the English East India Company because of commercial affairs at that time. In either case, whether the house was built for the British ambassador in Iran or by an Armenian merchant, the existence of English and Armenian inscriptions indicates a strong connection between Armen-

ian and British people. Although it has been suggested that the paintings reflect a Dutch influence, the IsMEO report notes that a Dutch scholar who examined the house pointed out that the paintings had been influenced by England, not the Netherlands. (Karapetian, 1974, 119-132)

On the other hand, Olearius describes a house very similar to Sukias House, as mentioned above, where he was invited and welcomed by the English East India Company. In addition, the depicting of Queen Elizabeth in a tableau on the external walls increases the likelihood of this house having belonged to the British ambassador in Isfahan during the Safavid period. There is no evidence that Sukias House was used by any of the above-named British merchants and nobles, but if any did so, then judging by the dates of their visits to Iran, those most likely to have done so are Sir Dodmore Cotton, Robert and Anthony Shirley, Richard Steel, John Crowther and Edward

Connock. Alternatively, it may be that British people working in Isfahan for the East India Company lived there.

It suggests that Armenian artists such as Minas, Lokas and Hakob Jughayets'i may have been responsible for decorating Armenian houses and buildings in New Julfa, Isfahan, probably including Sukias House. It seems likely that an Armenian merchant called Avadick who had travelled to Italy put much effort into trying to convince priests to let him paint the walls of cathedrals in New Julfa and that his role in the process of introducing European painting into work on New Julfa buildings is remarkable.

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