

FEMINISING THE DEMON: DĪV ICONOGRAPHY, GENDER, AND SECULARISING DISCOURSES IN QAJAR VISUAL CULTURE (C. 1789–1925)

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Abstract

This study examines the feminisation of dīv figures in Qajar visual culture (c. 1789 – 1925) and its relation to gendered representations and secularising discourses. Historically, dīvs were perceived as fearsome supernatural beings symbolising the dangers of nature, while women were depicted according to ideals of beauty and passivity. The central research question is: Which visual features of dīvs changed from the pre-Qajar to the Qajar period, and how are these changes reflected across different media and audiences? The aim is to explore how these visual transformations mirror broader social and gender dynamics and to analyse the relationship between dīv iconography and the evolving role of women in society. The study employs a comparative visual analysis and case study methodology. A corpus of manuscript illustrations, tiles, lacquer works, and Qajar prints was selected, and the visual features of dīvs (form, attire, posture, and behaviour) were coded using a systematic analytical framework. This approach allows for the identification of feminisation patterns in dīvs and their connection to the demythologisation of nature and the secularisation of women's social roles. The findings indicate that dīvs, as embodiments of the dangers of nature, and women, as symbols of beauty and tenderness, became fused in the Qajar period, resulting in dīvs assuming gentler and distinctly feminine forms. These visual transformations reflect broader cultural shifts and the interplay between iconography, gender, and social change.

Keywords

Qajar, Dīv, Gender, Iconography, Feminisation, Visual Culture

FEMINIZAR AL DEMONIO: ICONOGRAFÍA DEL DĪV, GÉNERO Y DISCURSOS SECULARIZADORES EN LA CULTURA VISUAL KAYAR (C. 1789–1925)

Resumen

Este estudio examina la feminización de las figuras *div* en la cultura visual kayar (c. 1789–1925) y su relación con las representaciones de género y los discursos secularizadores. Históricamente, los *dīvs* eran percibidos como seres sobrenaturales temibles que simbolizaban los peligros de la naturaleza, mientras que las mujeres eran representadas según ideales de belleza y pasividad. La pregunta central de la investigación es: ¿Qué rasgos visuales de los *dīvs* cambiaron del período pre-kayar al kayar y cómo se reflejan estos cambios en distintos medios y audiencias? El objetivo es explorar de qué manera estas transformaciones visuales reflejan dinámicas sociales y de género más amplias, así como examinar la relación entre la iconografía del *div* y el papel cambiante de las mujeres en la sociedad.

El estudio emplea un análisis visual comparativo y una metodología de estudio de caso. Se seleccionó un corpus de ilustraciones manuscritas, azulejos, obras lacadas y estampas kayar, y se codificaron los rasgos visuales de los *dīvs* (morfología, indumentaria, postura y comportamiento) mediante un marco analítico sistemático. Este enfoque permite identificar patrones de feminización en los *dīvs* y su conexión con la desmitologización de la naturaleza y la secularización de los roles sociales de las mujeres. Los resultados indican que, durante el período kayar, los *dīvs* -tradicionalmente asociados con los peligros de la naturaleza- y las mujeres -símbolos de belleza y ternura- se fusionaron visualmente, dando lugar a *dīvs* con rasgos más suaves y marcadamente femeninos. Estas transformaciones iconográficas que surgen, fruto de la interacción entre imagen, género y diversas transformaciones sociales, se convierten en el reflejo de unos cambios culturales de gran relevancia.

Palabras clave

Qajar, Dīv, Gender, Iconografía, Feminización, Cultura visual



Introduction

The figure of the *dīv* is one of the most enduring motifs in the visual traditions of Iran. From ancient Iranian mythology to epic narratives, religious imagery, and the applied arts, the *dīv* has consistently functioned as a symbolic marker of evil, chaos, the boundaries of human identity, and the moral order of society. Yet in the Qajar period (1789-1925), this motif underwent profound transformations. These changes were not limited to visual form; they reshaped the semantic and cultural functions of the *dīv*. In various media -including architectural tiles, lacquer paintings, lithographs, and manuscript illustrations- the *dīv* was not only reimagined but was frequently “softened,” “beautified,” or even “feminised,” a phenomenon that appears paradoxical when viewed against its long-standing role as an embodiment of disorder and monstrosity.

This visual and conceptual shift raises a fundamental question: why did the *dīv* in the Qajar era evolve from a fierce and threatening creature into a figure with softer, beautified, and sometimes gender-ambiguous features? Investigating this question provides insight into the mechanisms of representation in Qajar visual culture and enables us to trace the interplay between image, power, gender, and aesthetic discourse in this period. In this sense, the *dīv* serves as a mediating motif through which the tensions between tradition and modernity, religious morality and courtly aesthetics, and the redefinition of the body in Qajar art can be examined.

Despite the significance of this topic, previous scholarship has focused primarily on the role of the *dīv* in mythological and epic traditions, paying far less attention to the transformation of this figure within the diverse visual media of the Qajar era. Moreover, the relationship between gender codes, the aesthetics of the body, and the representation of evil in Qajar imagery has remained largely unexplored. Seeking to address this gap, the present study examines the visual transformation of the *dīv* in Qajar art and analyses the gendered and bodily signifiers embedded in these representations.

Accordingly, this article addresses three central research questions:

1. How does the motif of the *dīv* change in appearance, posture, bodily form, and symbolic attributes across Qajar artworks?
2. How do these transformations manifest differently across media, tiles, lithographs, lacquer objects, and manuscript paintings?
3. In what ways does the “softening” and feminisation of the *dīv* reflect broader discourses of gender, the body, and aesthetics in Qajar culture?

The study hypothesises that the transformation of the *dīv* in Qajar art was not merely decorative or imitative, but a visual response to shifting socio-cultural dynamics and emerging discourses on the body, gender, and the representation of power. In this context, features such as a beautified face, softened physique, feminine contours, and gentle gestures may be interpreted as signs of demythologisation and the secularisation of the embodiment of evil.

Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates visual analysis with anthropological theories of art, gender studies, and iconographic/iconological methods. The article proceeds by outlining the conceptual framework and defining key terms, followed by a review of relevant scholarship and a detailed explanation of the corpus and coding methodology. The analytical section presents a comparative study of images across four artistic media, supplemented by three focused case studies that demonstrate

specific patterns of gendered transformation. The article concludes with a discussion of the cultural implications of these findings within the broader context of Qajar visuality.

Research Methodology

This study is based on a comparative visual analysis and case study approach. Its aim is to examine the transformation of dīvs and their feminization in Qajar-era visual culture, and to explore the relationship between these representations and social and gender changes. A selected corpus of works -including manuscripts, tilework, lacquerware, and Qajar prints- was analyzed.

The visual features of dīvs (form, posture, attire, and behavior) were systematically coded using an analytical framework to identify patterns of gendered transformation and feminization. This approach allows for an examination of the relationship between visual representations, cultural and social transformations, and the changing roles of women in society. A comparative analysis of these works across different periods further clarifies the process of demythologizing nature and the secularization of women's roles.

The Relationship of Dīvs, Women, and Gender in Qajar Art and Illustration

The Qajar period marked the final stage of Iranians' struggle with nature. Artists of the era found depictions of hunting grounds a suitable platform for artistic expression. Human triumph over nature reduced the mythical elements associated with hunting and dīvs, leading to a rational and critical representation of nature (Garrard A, 2012). Nature, once considered sacred in the rituals of Mithra, Zoroastrianism, and Islam, gradually lost its mystique, while modern science, through accurate maps and records, enabled the utilization of natural resources. Consequently, sites previously endowed with mythic fame, such as valleys, caves, and wells -once believed to house supernatural beings like dīvs and jinns- lost much of their aura and no longer captivated the imagination.

Qajar society was intensely religious. However, some intellectuals, influenced by Western scholarship and scientific approaches to nature, gradually desacralized supernatural beings and approached them with critical reasoning (Eliade, 1997; Ginzburg, 1989). This widespread belief encouraged human defiance against imaginary supernatural entities. Artists depicted demonic beings as powerless and devoid of sinister traits, portraying them as passive and ineffectual.

During the Qajar period, women were confined to restricted spaces, primarily due to religious beliefs and the influence of centuries-old customs and rituals. Recent studies indicate that these limitations applied not only to ordinary women but also to elite women, and Qajar art reflected these conditions (Najmabadi, 2005; Afary, 2009).

The role of women in the representation of dīvs is particularly notable. Dīvs, as symbols of nature's dangers, and women, as embodiments of beauty and gentleness, were combined in Qajar illustrations, with dīvs assuming more feminine and gentle forms. This transformation demonstrates the demythologization of nature and the secularization of women's social roles, aligning with broader social and cultural changes (Garrard A, 2012; Kirmizis A, 2014).

Comparative studies with European illustrations of the same period reveal that the feminization of demonic entities in Iran paralleled European representations, both influenced by cultural and scientific developments (Warner, 1994; Russell, 1981).

1. Dīvs as Cultural and Intellectual Symbols

This section explores how natural forces are symbolically represented through dīvs and traces the historical transformations of these entities.

A) Dīvs in Prehistoric Beliefs

Dīvs were among the first entities sanctified and worshipped by Aryans. The synonymity of terms referring to dīvs and concepts such as God, day, and light indicates that these beliefs were present before their dispersion (Beekes, 2010). Supernatural beings, including dīvs, embodied the frightening and mysterious aspects of nature, whereas women represented its gentler, fertile, and nurturing qualities.

B) Dīvs in Early Religious Traditions

During the emergence of global religions, sacred beings were often regarded as fearsome entities capable of causing harm. The separation of negative traits from supreme divine powers contributed to the development of demonology and the belief in devils (Brandon, 1970). In Iranian culture, dīvs initially appeared as deities, later as malevolent beings defeated by heroes, and ultimately as peripheral, powerless figures represented in feminine forms.

C) Dīvs in Qajar-Era Art

The Qajar era represented a critical historical phase for Iranian society, confronting foreign cultural influences, technological backwardness, and outdated lifestyles. As humans increasingly gained control over nature through technology and firearms, previously feared dīvs were depicted in artworks as weakened, benign, and feminine (Garrard, 2012; Kirmizis A, 2014). This reflects the broader intellectual and cultural demythologization of nature.

2. Women, Gender, and the Feminization of Dīvs in Qajar Illustrations

The representation of women in relation to dīvs is particularly notable. Dīvs, as symbols of nature's dangers, and women, as embodiments of beauty and gentleness, were fused in Qajar illustrations, with dīvs adopting more feminine and gentle characteristics. This transformation reflects the secularization of women's social roles and mirrors broader cultural changes (Garrard B, 2012; Kirmizis B, 2014).

Comparative studies with European illustrations of the same period show that the feminization of demonic entities in Iran paralleled European developments, both influenced by scientific and cultural transformations (Warner, 1994; Russell, 1981).

Artworks from this period depict once-powerful and frightening entities as passive and ineffectual, while women's representations highlight both historical social restrictions and evolving notions of femininity. These shifts illustrate the interplay between iconography, gender, and societal change, demonstrating the gradual demythologization of supernatural beings and the secularization of female roles.

Artistic Depictions of Dīvs in the Pre-Qajar Period

In pre-Qajar artwork, dīvs were portrayed as formidable entities, distinguished primarily by their human-like forms. Artists frequently rendered them with fearsome faces, animalistic heads, horns and tails reminiscent of herbivores, and outfitted with armbands, leg bindings, saddles, and other ornamental elements (see Figures 1-10). Figure 1 the royal court of Jamshid is depicted; Jamshid sits on a magnificent golden throne, wearing a tall crown and an exquisite blue robe. He appears calm and dignified in the scene, with several courtiers standing on either side of him, reflecting the respect, grandeur, and order of his court. However, the most striking part of the image is the two powerful demons carrying Jamshid's

throne, each with completely different and exaggerated features: The demon on the left has a muscular body, an animal-like face with horns, and large, powerful claws- claws that resemble the talons of birds of prey. Its posture suggests that it is struggling under the weight of the throne. The demon on the right has a slender body with a thin tail, and its legs, instead of being human, resemble the hooves of a four-legged animal. These hooves emphasize its supernatural strength and nature, creating a stark contrast with its semi-human body. The presence of these two differently-featured demons -one with bird-like claws and the other with four-legged hooves- not only demonstrates Jamshid's extraordinary power but also highlights the marvelous and mythological structure of his world.



Fig. 1. Jamshid's throne borne by Dīvs, *Shahnameh*, 1435–1440 AD, Timurid, Shiraz, No MS_22_1948, f.11v. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 17.5 × 24.5 cm. Fitzwilliam Museum. (URL1)

Analysis of Pre-Qajar Dīv Imagery in Persian Art

In pre-Qajar Persian art, dīvs were consistently portrayed as powerful and often terrifying entities, reflecting both the human confrontation with nature and the moral lessons embedded in epic literature. The exaggerated physical features -such as monstrous faces, talon-like hands, horns, and tails- emphasized their otherworldly threat while drawing parallels to the animalistic aspects of human behavior (Garrard B, 2012).

Moreover, the interaction between dīvs and heroes, such as Rostam in the *Shahnameh*, symbolically represented the struggle between order and chaos, human courage and nature's

unpredictability. These confrontations were visually dramatized, with dīvs frequently depicted wielding weapons, dominating scenes, or physically challenging heroes, which intensified the narrative tension and moral instruction (see Figures 2-8).

Interestingly, the overt male characteristics of many dīvs, including explicit genital depiction, suggest a gendered dimension in Persian demonology, linking masculinity to strength, aggression, and danger. This reflects the cultural tendency to assign human traits, including social and moral values, to supernatural entities (Beekes, 2010; Russell, 1981).

The detailed accoutrements, such as saddles, armbands, and bindings, further humanized these beings, creating a hybrid imagery that straddled the natural and the supernatural. This indicates a sophisticated visual language, where artists were not merely illustrating stories but encoding ethical, social, and philosophical commentary through iconography (Kirmizis, 2014).

In summary, pre-Qajar dīv illustrations were not only artistic expressions but also tools for moral and cultural education. They mediated societal values, human-nature relationships, and gendered perceptions, providing insight into the intellectual and aesthetic priorities of the time.

Dīvs were sometimes illustrated in painting as wielding a mace, a detail especially prominent in depictions of battle scenes (see Figures 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. Battle of Imam Ali with Subterranean Dīvs, *Khaaranneh*, 1476–1477 AD, Timurid, Shiraz, No. 7075, f.71. Watercolor, 27.5 × 38.3 cm, artist: Farhad. Golestan Palace Museum.



Fig. 3. Battle of Tahmuras with Dīvs, *Shahnameh Tabmasbi*, 1525 AD, No. 1970.301.3, f.23v. Watercolor, 18.6 × 28.3 cm, artist: Sultan Muhammad, Tabriz. Metropolitan Museum of Art. (URL2).

In Figure 2, from the *Khaarannameh* manuscript (1476–1477 AD), dīvs are depicted fighting Imam Ali. These dīvs wield maces and dominate the battle scene with strength and ferocity. Their depiction not only conveys violence and menace but also highlights the contrast between human courage and capability and supernatural powers.

In Figure 3, Tahmuras is depicted combating dīvs in a dynamic battle scene. The dīvs are vividly portrayed with exaggerated, supernatural features, wielding weapons and displaying ferocity, while Tahmuras, mounted on his horse, confronts them with courage and strategic prowess. The composition emphasizes the tension between human heroism and chaotic supernatural forces, a recurring theme in the *Shahnameh* visual tradition.

The physical anatomy of dīvs mirrored that of heroes; however, dīvs were made to look more robust and formidable, emphasising the hero's inner struggle against their own negative and animalistic qualities (Figures 4 to 6).



Fig. 4. Rustam Slays the White Div, *Shahnameh*, ca. 1460, Shiraz. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold leaf on paper, 26.5 × 18.1 cm, Folio: 28v, University of Michigan Museum of Art, No. 1963/1.45. (URL3).

In Figure 4, the dīv is depicted with an anatomy that closely mirrors that of the hero, yet it is intentionally exaggerated to appear more powerful, animalistic, and fearsome. The elongated limbs, pronounced musculature, horns, stark white face, and claw-like hands transform the figure into a hybrid creature situated between human and beast. Despite being shown in a fallen and defeated position, the dīv's body remains visually strong and robust, emphasizing the formidable nature of the adversary the hero must confront. This visual strategy -common throughout the Persian miniature tradition- portrays the dīv as physically comparable to the hero, yet corrupted, chaotic, and set against the natural order.

Such anatomical resemblance underscores that the battle is not merely an external confrontation but a symbolic encounter with the hero's own internal forces: the darker, instinctual, and animalistic aspects of the self. The swirling rocks, darkened environment,

and disturbed chromatic field surrounding the *dīv* further enhance its liminal and destabilized nature, positioning it between the realm of the natural world and the domain of disorder. Thus, in Figure 4, the *dīv* functions not simply as a physical foe but as the embodied representation of the negative dimensions of the human psyche-elements that must be subdued for the restoration of balance and moral clarity.

In this illustration (Figure 5), the *dīv* is once again depicted with a body that closely parallels the anatomy of the hero -muscular, heavy, and unmistakably human- yet augmented with animalistic features that push it beyond the realm of humanity and into the domain of chaos and antinature. The powerful limbs, broad shoulders, aggressive gesture of the hands, and the mask-like white face, together with the long pointed horns, transform the *dīv* into a hybrid being, part human and part beast. This structural resemblance between the hero and the *dīv* follows a visual logic well established in *Shāhnāmeh* illustration: the *dīv* serves as a mirror figure, embodying not only an external adversary but also the darker, instinctual, and uncontrolled forces within the hero himself.



Fig. 5. Rustam Slays the White Div, *Shahnāmah*, 1500–1515 AD, Supplément Persan 1122, Folio 62v. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 34.6 × 27 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France. (URL4).



Fig. 6. *Rustam Slays the White Div*, *Shāhnāmeh*, 1542 AD, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, Folio 67v, Ryl Pers 932, 20.6 × 10.8 cm. Shiraz, The John Rylands Library, University of Manchester (URL5).

Here, the *dīv* is shown collapsed within the darkness of a cave, surrounded by jagged purple-blue rocks rendered with undulating, unnatural outlines. This setting situates the *dīv* on the threshold between the natural world and the realm of the subconscious. The deep blackness of the cave, enveloping and encroaching upon the *dīv*'s body, symbolizes the psychological depths the hero must confront. Meanwhile, the sharply contrasting and anxiety-laden colors of the rocks -from violet to orange- heighten the sense of internal disturbance and emphasize the *dīv*'s unstable and chaotic nature.

Although the creature appears to be defeated, its body remains visually strong and resistant, signaling that only a hero who has mastered his own anger and animal impulses can truly overcome it. This simultaneously defeated yet forceful posture transforms the *div* from a mere monster into an idea: a concentrated embodiment of darkness that can only be subdued through moral and spiritual elevation.

On the right side of the composition, the hero stands apart as an observer; the physical distance between him and the fallen *div* accentuates the symbolic division between “order” and “chaos,” “reason” and “instinct.” The presence of the horse partially hidden behind the rocks alludes to the hero’s return to the bright, human world after this descent into darkness.

Thus, the illustration represents not only a scene of combat but also the mythic struggle between the human and the unseen forces within him. In Figure 5, the *div* emerges as a being equal to the hero in physical strength and yet ontologically part of him -a shadow- self that must be subdued for the hero to attain wisdom and inner clarity.

In Figure 6, a terrifying *div* can also be observed, which, in addition to its robust body, has a frightening face. Its crenellated horns and facial features, such as wide eyes, an open mouth, and a long, unusual nose, distinguish it from a hero like Rostam.

Divs in pre-Qajar illustrations were often shown as distinctly male, with genitalia sometimes portrayed explicitly (Figures 7-9).

This visual emphasis conveyed their violent and threatening nature. Some cultural expressions, such as the Persian term *narreh-ghoul* -used to refer to heavysset young men- may have been inspired by these portrayals.



Fig. 7. Rostam Slays Arzhang *div*, Shahnameh Tahmasbi, 1522 AD, No. 2019714668, 19×21 cm, watercolor, Tabriz, 122v, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (URL6).



Fig. 8. Rostam Slays Arzhang dīv, Shahnameh, 1628 AD, No. Additional 27258, 13×22.6 cm, watercolor, Isfahan, 92r, The British Library (URL7).



Fig. 9. The Dīv Akvan Throws Rustam into the Sea, 1660 AD, No. 1974.290.43, 14.3×25.2 cm, watercolor, Isfahan, 158v, Artist Mu'in Musavvir, Metropolitan Museum of Art (URL8).

Introduction to the Visual Analysis of Qajar Era Artworks

The Qajar era witnessed a distinct transformation in artistic representation, particularly in the portrayal of heroes and supernatural beings such as dīvs. These visual narratives not only reflect aesthetic trends but also encode social and cultural perceptions of gender, power, and morality. In this section, we examine a series of artworks from the period, highlighting the metamorphosis of artistic motifs and the nuanced depiction of dīvs in contrast to heroic figures. Each illustration or artifact will be analyzed in terms of morphology, behavior, attire, and symbolic significance, offering insights into the evolving visual language of Qajar art.

Metamorphosis of Artistic Motifs in the Qajar Era: Thematic and Technical Approach

During the Qajar era, Iranian art underwent profound transformations in both content and technique. To better understand these changes, this study focuses on two main axes: thematic differentiation and artistic techniques.

From a thematic perspective, artworks of this period show significant changes in the depiction of male and female characters, particularly supernatural beings such as dīvs and epic heroes like Rostam and Fath Ali Shah. Examining recurring motifs allows us to trace patterns in the reinterpretation of these figures, including changes in morphology, attire, and behavior, which reflect the social attitudes of the time.

From a technical perspective, Qajar artists employed a wide range of media, including lithography, miniature, lacquer painting, tilework, and metal engraving. Each medium not only shapes the visual style of the work but also influences the way motifs are presented, whether in manuscripts, decorative panels, or architectural spaces.

In this study, we first categorize the artworks thematically to make the changes in subjects and narrative choices clearly visible. In subsequent sections, a technical analysis of the works is provided to elucidate the relationship between medium, technique, and the transformation of style and motif representation.

By structuring the research around these two axes -theme and technique- our aim is to provide a coherent framework for analyzing Qajar art before delving into detailed case studies.

Battle of the Hero and the Dīv

In Figure 10 the dīv is depicted completely nude, corpulent, and plump. Its prominent feminine breasts and thick thighs create a striking contrast with Rostam's muscular and heroic physique. The dīv's skin tone matches that of Rostam, and its horns and semi-animal face emphasize its supernatural and non-human characteristics.

The dīv's posture, lying on the ground, renders it vulnerable and powerless, showing no signs of resistance or aggression. This reflects the Qajar-era artistic tendency to soften and feminize dīvs.

The dīv is adorned with a short yellow skirt with black outlining, which accentuates its semi-nude body and feminine curves. This image transforms the dīv from a menacing and terrifying entity into a vulnerable, soft, and feminine figure, and the contrast between hero and dīv mirrors the broader social and gendered shifts in Qajar society.



Fig. 10. Battle of Rostam and the Div, *Shahnameh*, 1924 AD. Lithograph, 20.7 × 34.9 cm, No. S1986.392. National Museum of Asian Art. (URL9)

In Figure 11, the hero is depicted without a mustache and with softer features compared to classical representations. The hero and the div are approximately the same size. The div has a spotted body and an animal-like face, yet wears a very short skirt and has a narrow waist. Despite being struck by the hero's sword, the div remains indifferent. This image exemplifies the Qajar-era trend of “softening” and “feminising” divs, reducing their threatening and violent traits while emphasizing delicate and feminine characteristics.



Fig. 11. Slaying of a div by a folk hero, the Qajar era, lithograph (Zolfaghari, Heydari, 2012: 1981).

In Figure 12, the *div* is depicted with white, spotted skin, pendulous breasts, plump thighs, and round eyes. The golden eyebrows and eyelids with red outlines give it a feminine yet non-human appearance. Monstrous features such as protruding long teeth, horns, drooping ears, and a broad nose maintain its presence within the realm of mythical creatures. The short skirt and jewelry, including necklace, anklets, and armlets, closely resemble the attire of Qajar women, while the emphasis on body form highlights the period's gendered aesthetics. The *div*'s slender lower legs contrasted with its plump thighs direct visual focus to sexualized and dominant aspects. Its direct gaze toward the viewer creates an engaging yet threatening presence. The hero, wearing a tiger-skin garment and holding a dagger, has grabbed one of the *div*'s horns and is targeting its body. The *div* is shown kneeling on the ground.

This figure exemplifies the “feminisation” of *divs* in Qajar-era art. Despite the monstrous features, the body form, short skirt, and jewelry reinforce feminine traits, simultaneously reducing the *div*'s natural aggression and reflecting social representations of women in Qajar society. The kneeling posture and lack of active resistance against the hero emphasize the transformation of traditional supernatural roles and illustrate human dominance over nature. This combination clearly demonstrates the interplay of gender, power, and aesthetics in Qajar visual culture.



Fig. 12. Slaying of a *div* by a folk hero, the Qajar era, lithograph (Zolfaghari, Heydari, 1393: 1981).



Fig. 13. Slaying of a *div* by a folk hero, the Qajar era, lithograph (Zolfaghari, Heydari, 1393: 1981).

In Figure 13, the *div* stands fully nude with human-colored skin. Its arms and legs are human, although the toenails are slightly elongated. The head is slightly oversized, and the breasts retain a feminine form. The thighs are plump and the arms strong, creating a blend of power and femininity. The *div* wears a pleated red skirt and armlets. The scene is set in a watery environment filled with fish, adding a fantastical and surreal dimension. Horns,

drooping ears, and round eyes reinforce the creature's monstrous identity while simultaneously highlighting its feminine features.

The dīv holds a rectangular panel in its hands, representing Akvān Dīv, upon which Rostam lies. This posture demonstrates the dīv's control over the captured figure, while its feminine attributes, including the pleated skirt, soft body contours, and curvaceous thighs, slightly temper its menace and impart an aesthetic quality.

This figure exemplifies the Qajar-era tendency to merge gendered and monstrous features in the depiction of dīvs. Although the dīv displays supernatural power by restraining Akvān Dīv, its feminine features -pleated skirt, breasts, plump thighs, and softened bodily lines- reflect the aesthetic sensibilities and social nuances of the period. The combination of these elements illustrates the interplay between heroism, myth, and the feminisation of fearsome creatures in Qajar visual culture.

In Figure 14, both Rostam and the White Dīv are depicted standing and engaged in combat. The Dīv possesses a human-like body with white skin, arms and legs resembling those of a human, and a spotted torso. Its feminine breasts, full thighs, and narrow waist, along with the short feathered skirt, create a feminine appearance while retaining monstrous characteristics. The presence of horns, ears, and a dragon-like tail highlights the creature's mythological nature. The elongated face, almond-shaped eyes with neatly arranged long lashes, and arched eyebrows convey a feminine yet non-human aspect. Rostam, holding a sword and positioned dominantly, confronts the Dīv. The background, featuring natural and architectural elements, enhances the visual composition and the narrative of the battle.

This figure exemplifies the "feminisation" of Dīvs in Qajar-era art. The body form, short skirt, and facial details echo Qajar female aesthetics, while the horns, tail, and other fantastical elements underscore the Dīv's supernatural identity. The standing posture and active engagement of the Dīv with the hero indicate that the level of interaction and power of supernatural beings relative to humans varies depending on the narrative. This representation emphasizes the interplay between gender, power, and aesthetics in Qajar visual culture.



Fig. 14. *Battle of Rostam and the White Dīv*, bathhouse in Afjabad Garden, Shiraz, mid-14th century AH, 420×380 cm, seven-colour tile, artist Mousazadeh (Seif, 1997: 163).

The depiction of Fath Ali Shah in Qajar painting follows the prevalent pattern of “royal aesthetics,” emphasizing a lean figure, narrow waist, delicate hands, and a refined facial appearance. Scholars of Qajar art have noted that the king’s body was intentionally idealized according to the aesthetic standards of the time, in which a slender, graceful figure and soft facial lines signified both “royal elegance” and “moral authority” (Diba 1998; Babaie 2008).

This idealization continues in battle scenes as well. In two lacquer works depicting Fath Ali Shah’s battles with *dīvs* (Figures 15 and 16), the king is shown with the same elongated, refined body, standing serenely against the *dīvs*. Unlike earlier visual traditions in which combat with demons involved exaggerated physicality and violence, here the king’s body shows no sign of bulk, aggression, or strain; instead, he appears as in a courtly portrait, even within the battlefield context.

In contrast, the *dīvs* are rendered with human-colored skin, very full thighs, narrow waists, feminine breasts, and short, pleated skirts. Their monstrous elements –such as horns, elongated ears, rounded eyes, and humorous facial expressions– combined with adornments like bell necklaces, create a hybrid effect of feminized and comically neutralized bodies (Grube 1966; Diba 1998). This duality transforms the *dīvs* from symbols of chaos and violence into *lissome, seductive, and partially neutralized* figures.

As some scholars have pointed out, if the *dīv* motifs were removed, it would be difficult for a contemporary Qajar viewer to distinguish between a “king actively dispelling evil” and an “elegantly dressed young aristocrat”; the king’s body and that of the mythical hero are constructed according to a shared aesthetic logic (Babaie 2008: 146). Consequently, the mythic violence of the scene is tempered through “bodily refinement” and a “decorative logic,” reflecting a broader visual aesthetic in Qajar art.



Fig. 15. *Battle of Fath Ali Shah and the Dīv*, Qajar era, no. 582784i, 35×42 cm, lacquer, Wellcome Collection (URL12).



Fig. 16. *Battle of Fath Ali Shah and the Dīv*, Qajar era, no. 582819i, 43×62 cm, lacquer, Wellcome Collection (URL13).

Dīv in Court Scenes

In Figure 17 Solomon is depicted at the center of the composition as a young and handsome man seated on a luxurious throne. His radiant crown, fiery halo, and red attire signify his prophetic and royal status, reflecting both spiritual and political authority. Surrounding him are courtiers, women, animals, and supernatural beings, arranged symmetrically to reinforce visual harmony and the central hierarchy.

In the foreground, two *dīvs* are present. The first, white-skinned and spotted like a human body, wears a short red skirt, has full thighs, a narrow waist, and prominent breasts. This *dīv* also features horns, a beard, a tail, and holds a mace, while wearing a necklace, armbands, and ankle bands. Its hands and feet are fully human. The second *dīv*, dark green in color, wears a lighter skirt and lacks a mace, but otherwise shares similar features with the first. Both figures have large, round eyes and fiery eyebrows.

These figures exemplify a Qajar visual strategy that combines human and monstrous forms, portraying Solomon's control over supernatural beings. Human and feminine features -such as full thighs, narrow waists, and pronounced breasts- illustrate the process of the *feminization* of mythological creatures, whereby the terrifying aspects of *dīvs* are tempered through aestheticized beauty and sensuality. This visual choice mediates the tension between earthly and supernatural power, reflecting the interplay of gender, beauty, and authority in Qajar art.

Thus, the depiction of Solomon not only asserts his authority but also highlights how gendered bodies and aesthetic norms were represented in Qajar visual culture. The humanization and feminized features of the *dīvs*, along with attention to decorative details and posture, reveal the Qajar logic of visual aest.



Fig. 17. *Dīvs in the court of Solomon*, Qajar-period lacquered binding, papier-mâché, 37 × 24.5 cm, PNS 383, National Library of Russia. (URL14).

Figure 18 presents another example, engraved on the tail of a peacock-shaped vessel, depicting *dīvs* surrounding the throne of Prophet Solomon. The *dīvs* are shown standing or moving around the royal seat, displaying a combination of human and supernatural traits. Using the peacock-shaped volume as a background creates a decorative and symbolic space, highlighting Solomon's grandeur and his control over supernatural beings.

The *dīvs*' attire is generally limited to short skirts, corresponding to the clothing of lower social classes. However, some *dīvs* are depicted wearing garments resembling women's trousers and dresses. In certain depictions, the *dīvs* wear tight trousers, with visible lines along the calves. Women of the period wore a fitted, delicate red garment called *Arkhalig*,

distinguished by a corset-like waist panel (Soltikoff, 2002: 91). Similarly, women sometimes wore tight trousers with short skirts known as *Shaliteh* (D'Allemagne, 1956: 291–292).

These tight trousers were likely influenced by Western fashions, as Naser al-Din Shah specifically commissioned such trousers and short jackets to emulate European trends (Alam & Dinary, 2019: 87). Other accounts of traditional Iranian trousers correspond to the depiction of the angelic figure in the scene. D'Allemagne notes that Iranian women, when venturing outdoors, wore *Chaqchour*—tapered trousers wide at the thighs and narrow at the calves (D'Allemagne, 1956: 292).

The composition and choice of clothing for the *dīvs* exemplify a visual representation of power and social order in Qajar art. Human-like bodies combined with supernatural traits not only emphasize Solomon's dominance over otherworldly beings but also reflect Qajar artists' sensitivity to fashion and human form in decorative compositions. This approach mediates between social reality, traditional visual conventions, and mythological representations of power, highlighting meticulous attention to clothing details and visual symbolism.

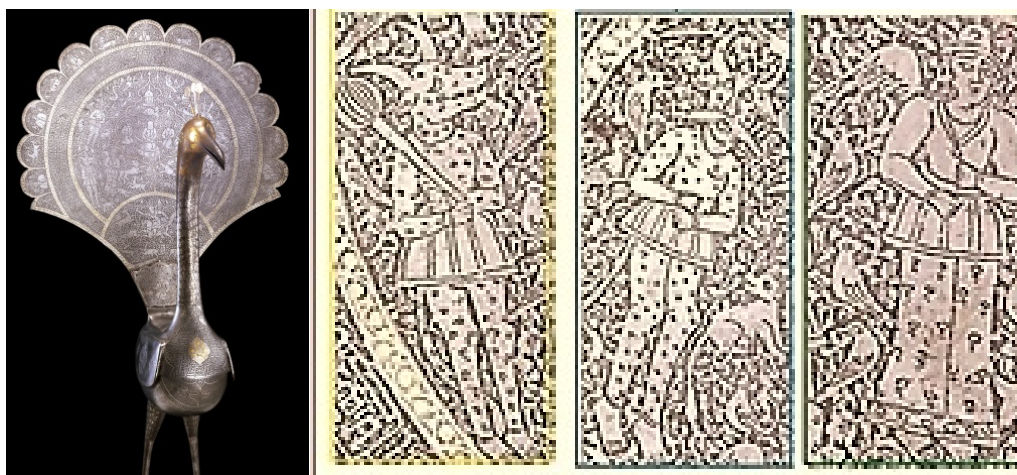


Fig. 18. A *dīv* and an angel in the court of Prophet Solomon, 19th century, No. 00030546001, 80 cm, turquoise, steel, gold, Qazvin, British Museum (URL15).

In Qajar-era art, *dīvs* were generally depicted as powerful and threatening beings. However, in depictions of the the royal court (Figures 19 and 20), artists represented *dīvs* differently: they are shown standing with their arms crossed, in a passive posture, with their sense of violence or menace significantly reduced.

From a feminist perspective, this shift may reflect the artist's attempt to control and domesticate the “feminine/supernatural force,” since, in the Iranian visual tradition, female-like beings or human female bodily traits in *dīvs* implicitly conveyed power and seductiveness.

The attire of the *dīvs* is also significant: their short, pleated skirts, resembling women's clothing of the period, create a combination of human form and decorative fantasy. From a gendered perspective, this visual choice may indicate a patriarchal attitude toward power and control; *dīvs* that were previously frightening and threatening are now presented in a

feminine, ornamental, and compliant manner, their role limited to reinforcing royal hierarchy and displaying masculine authority.

The posture of standing with arms crossed and the pleated, short skirts, while retaining their monstrous identity, emphasizes controlled power and the social order of the king. In other words, from a feminist viewpoint, these images not only represent supernatural power and royal hierarchy but also convey the society's gendered and patriarchal attitudes toward the body, gender, and authority through non-human figures.



Fig. 19. *Dīvs at the ceremony of the island kingdom's grandeur*, Qajar era, lithograph (Farhange Razi, 1949: 559).

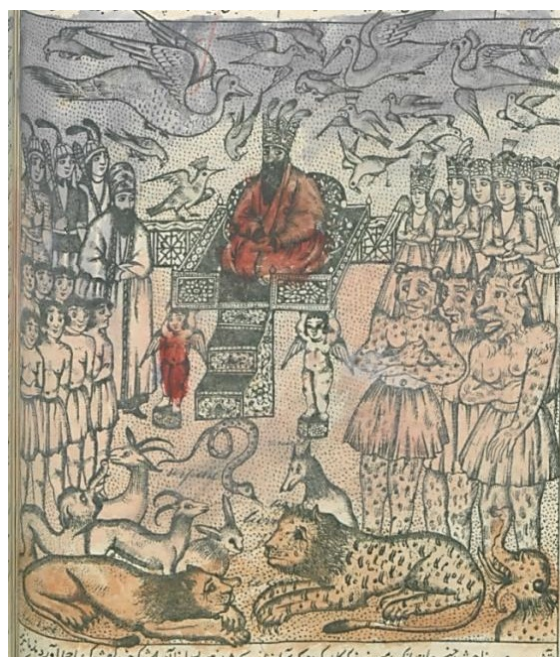


Fig. 20. *Dīvs in the court of Prophet Solomon*, Lithograph, Lithograph. No 695, *Arabic Short Stories*, 1275 AH, 36.5 × 22.5 cm, folio .329. Malek National Library and Museum, Tehran.

Figures 21 and 22 are lithographic works from the Qajar period, presenting a dual scene in which a group of *dīvs* stands on the right and a group of naked women on the left, both prepared to serve the royal court in an unidentified land. The identical clothing -short skirts- worn by both *dīvs* and women conveys multiple layers of symbolic meaning. This arrangement evokes Prophet Solomon's court for Muslim Iranian audiences, where attendants included humans, animals, and supernatural beings. At the same time, the scene reflects the hedonistic and pleasure-oriented lifestyle of the Qajar kings, while also illustrating humanity's dominion over nature and supernatural entities, portraying *dīvs* and otherworldly beings as humble and obedient under human authority.

In these works, women are depicted as street girls with faces resembling European dolls, whereas the *dīvs* simultaneously serve as both terrifying symbols of nature and sexualized servants responding to male desire—the same *dīvs* that, according to traditional narratives, served in Prophet Solomon's court. Unlike earlier depictions, these *dīvs* are unarmed, with soft faces, small non-threatening jaws, short feminine skirts, and seductive expressions, emphasizing their diminished threat and subordination.

Figure 23 provides a clear example of the transformation of dīvs in Qajar art. Here, a group of dīvs is shown holding maces and arranged in a chorus-like formation. Their body forms and postures -relaxed, soft, and alluring- convey neither aggression nor readiness for battle. The maces themselves resemble honey spoons rather than lethal weapons, further reducing the figures' threatening presence. Despite this, their ties to Iranian artistic conventions remain evident, as they wear tonbans and patterned trousers traditionally associated with Qajar women. Figure 24 complements this example by depicting a group of female dīvs. Remarkably, these dīvs closely resemble the male dīvs from the previous image, sharing features such as unusually shaped eyes and animal-like paws instead of human feet. Comparing the two images highlights the significant blurring of gender distinctions: all the dīvs possess human bodies with feminine characteristics, and their clothing, body forms, and postures are almost identical. The only remaining marker of male gender is the presence of a tail, which serves as the sole indicator in the absence of other distinguishing features.



Fig. 21. *Dīvs with pitchforks*, 19th century, tilework, 26.7 × 26.5 cm No. MAO 1192, Musée du Louvre (URL16).



Fig. 22. *Feminine dīv*, 19th century, tilework, 26.2 × 27.2 cm MAO 1194, Musée du Louvre (URL17)

Description of Dīv Visual Transformations: Pre-Qajar vs. Qajar Periods

The comparative analysis of dīv imagery across Pre-Qajar and Qajar periods reveals significant transformations in morphology, gender representation, attire, posture, and symbolic function.

Pre-Qajar Period (Figures 1–9):

In Pre-Qajar art, dīvs were predominantly depicted as male, powerful, and fearsome. Their bodies were generally bulky and muscular, emphasizing strength and physical dominance. Facial features were exaggerated and often animalistic or mask-like, with horns, claws, and occasionally explicitly male genitalia reinforcing their gendered aggression. Postures were active, combative, or physically challenging, highlighting the confrontation between heroes and supernatural forces. Attire was minimal or symbolic -armor, armbands, saddles, and other embellishments- serving both practical and narrative functions. Across various media, including miniature manuscripts and battle illustrations, the dīv consistently embodied chaos,

danger, and moral challenges, acting as a foil to heroic figures like Rostam and other epic protagonists.

Qajar Period (Figures 10–22):

By contrast, Qajar-era representations show a marked feminisation and softening of dīvs. The body form transitioned from bulky to soft, rounded, and more human-like, often featuring feminine characteristics such as breasts, narrow waists, and plump thighs. Facial features became gentler, with almond-shaped eyes, arched eyebrows, and stylized expressions, though remnants of monstrous identity -horns, tails, and animal-like traits- were retained. Attire shifted to short pleated skirts, jewelry, and garments resembling contemporary women's clothing, reflecting both aesthetic preferences and social norms. Postures became passive or submissive -kneeling, lying, or standing with arms crossed- signaling reduced aggression and an alignment with human control.

Across media -lithographs, watercolor paintings, tilework, and lacquer- Qajar dīvs were often hybridized, blending feminine human traits with traditional monstrous elements. In battle scenes, the contrast between hero and dīv emphasized not only heroic dominance but also social and cultural discourses around gender, power, and aesthetics. Courtly depictions, such as those in the context of Solomon or Fath Ali Shah, further highlight the dīv's role as a decorative, feminized, and compliant figure, subordinated to human authority while simultaneously exhibiting visual appeal.

To contextualize these findings within the broader visual transformation, the comparative data summarized in *Table 1: Visual Features of Dīv in Pre-Qajar and Qajar Periods*¹ clearly demonstrates the systematic shift from monstrous, masculine traits to softened, feminized, and decorative attributes.

Table: Visual Features of Dīv in Pre-Qajar and Qajar Periods¹

Figure	Period	Artwork / Source	Dīv Gender	Body Form	Attire	Face	Body Posture	Medium
1	Pre-Qajar	Shahnameh, 1435–1440	M	Bulky	Armor / ornaments	Animalistic	Carrying throne / struggling	Miniature
2	Pre-Qajar	Khavarannam eh, 1476–1477	M	Bulky	Minimal armor	Terrifying	Fighting	Miniature
3	Pre-Qajar	Shahnameh Tahmasbi, 1525	M	Bulky	Minimal armor	Terrifying	Fighting	Miniature
4	Pre-Qajar	Shāhnāmeḥ 1460	M	Bulky / muscular	Armor	Animalistic / Human	Fallen / defeated	Miniature
5	Pre-Qajar	Shāhnāmeḥ, 1500–1515	M	Bulky	Armor	Mask-like / Horned	Collapsed	Miniature
6	Pre-Qajar	Shāhnāmeḥ 1542	M	Bulky	Armor	Animalistic	Fighting / dynamic	Miniature
7	Pre-Qajar	Shahnameh Tahmasbi, 1522	M	Bulky	Armor	Male genital emphasized	Fighting	Miniature

¹ Coding Legend:

Dīv Gender: M = Male, F = Female, H = Hybrid / Ambiguous

Body Form: B = Bulky / muscular, S = Soft / rounded

Face: T = Terrifying, A = Animalistic, F = Feminine

Body Posture: S = Standing, K = Kneeling, L = Lying, M = Fighting

8	Pre-Qajar	Shahnameh, 1628	M	Bulky	Armor	Male genital emphasized	Fighting	Miniature
9	Pre-Qajar	Shahnameh, 1660	M	Bulky	Armor	Animalistic	Throwing hero	Miniature
10	Qajar	Battle of Rostam, 1924	H/F	Soft / rounded	Short skirt	Feminine	Feminine	Lithograph
11	Qajar	Folk hero vs Dīv, Qajar	F	Soft / rounded	Short skirt	Feminine	Feminine	Lithograph
12	Qajar	Battle of Rostam and White Dīv, Qajar	F	Soft / rounded	Short skirt	Feminine	Feminine	Miniature
13	Qajar	Rostam and Akvān Dīv, 1800–1850	F	Soft / rounded	Short skirt	Feminine	Feminine	Miniature
14	Qajar	Battle of Rostam and White Dīv, Afifabad	F	Soft / rounded	Short skirt	Feminine	Feminine	Tile
15	Qajar	Fath Ali Shah vs Dīv	F	Soft / rounded	Pleated skirt, jewelry	Feminine	Standing	Lacquer
16	Qajar	Fath Ali Shah vs Dīv	F	Soft / rounded	Pleated skirt, jewelry	Feminine	Standing	Lacquer
17	Qajar	Court of Solomon	F	Soft / rounded	Pleated skirt, jewelry	Feminine	Standing / submissive	Lacquer
18	Qajar	Court of Solomon	F	Soft / rounded	Short skirt	Feminine	Standing	Metal / vessel
19	Qajar	King of the Island	F	Soft / rounded	Skirt	Feminine	Standing	Lithograph
20	Qajar	Court of Solomon	F	Soft / rounded	Skirt	Feminine	Standing	Lithograph
21	Qajar	Group of divs holding maces	F	Soft, alluring, human-like	Short skirt, tonban	Standing, chorus-like arrangement	Soft, human-like, feminine curves	Lithograph
22	Qajar	Group of female divs	F	Human, feminine, resembling male divs	Short skirt	Standing	Human, feminine, closely resembling male divs	Lithograph

Conclusion

This study, by examining the visual metamorphosis of the *div* in Qajar art, demonstrates that this mythical being -long regarded in ancient Iranian traditions as a manifestation of evil forces, chaos, and the perils of nature- underwent a significant transformation in the Qajar period. The *div* was gradually reimagined as a softened, less threatening, and even feminized figure. This shift is not merely a visual alteration but a reflection of profound cultural, gender-related, and epistemic changes in nineteenth-century Iran.

A comparative analysis between pre-Qajar images and Qajar artworks reveals that earlier *divs* were typically depicted with aggressive features: muscular bodies, monstrous faces, animalistic manes and tails, and overt associations with masculinity. In the Qajar era,

however, artists increasingly abandoned such traits and instead rendered the *div* with softer bodies, delicate facial features, rounded and feminine forms, passive gestures, and sometimes garments resembling women's clothing or corpulent, harmless physiques. These changes mark the *div*'s departure from its traditional role as a terrifying force and its transformation into a decorative, domesticated, and occasionally humorous motif.

This process can be analyzed on three levels:

Transformation of the Concept of Nature

With the spread of new technologies, the rise of hunting with firearms, and the influence of Western scientific thought, nature gradually became "de-sacralized" and more controllable in the Qajar worldview. The *div* -the symbolic embodiment of nature's dangers- likewise descended from its sacred-mythical status and was reduced to a harmless and feminized figure. This indicates a broader "demythologization" of natural forces.

Representation of Gender and the Body

The visual association between "div" and "woman" in Qajar art -where *divs* acquire feminine and delicate qualities- mirrors the social discourse of the period. While real women in Qajar society faced significant social restrictions, the female body in the artistic sphere was reproduced as a signifier of beauty, softness, and passivity. The feminization of the *div* is an extension of this discourse: a being once defined by violence and danger becomes gentle, decorative, and marked by feminine traits.

Secularization of the Image of Evil

In earlier narratives, the *div* embodied absolute evil and acted as an anti-heroic force. With the decline of sacred beliefs regarding supernatural beings, however, the *div* became a purely aesthetic subject. This shift reflects a wider trend of secularization in Qajar art, whereby religious and mythological concepts were reinterpreted as worldly, emotional, and ornamental images.

Drawing on analyses of manuscripts, lithographs, tiles, and lacquer paintings, it becomes clear that the softening, desacralization, and feminization of the *div* were not isolated developments but rather the cumulative result of concurrent cultural, gendered, and intellectual transformations in Qajar society. In this period, the *div* becomes a "historical body" upon which new attitudes toward nature, corporeality, gender, and power are inscribed.

Ultimately, the transformation of the *div* in Qajar imagery should be regarded as one of the most striking examples of semantic change in Iranian art: a mythical creature -once the embodiment of fear and chaos- re-emerges as a sign of femininity, ornamentation, and the worldly redefinition of evil.

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