

**SAFAVID-ERA AZERBAIJANI CULTURE IN WORLD MUSEUMS: HERITAGE,
IDENTITY, AND REPRESENTATION**

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the material heritage of Azerbaijan during the Safavid era as preserved in leading world museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Islamic Art (Doha), and the Azerbaijan National Museum of History. While these artifacts are frequently exhibited under generalized labels such as “Islamic,” “Persian,” or “Eastern,” the study emphasizes their Azerbaijani identity through historical, ethnographic, and stylistic analysis. The research applies a heritage studies perspective and a comparative analysis of museum catalogues, travellers’ accounts, and visual ethnography. Findings reveal that while Safavid material culture contributed significantly to global artistic and economic exchange, its Azerbaijani origin remains underrepresented in international museum narratives. This article highlights the importance of contextualizing these artifacts as part of Azerbaijan’s national heritage and calls for further scholarly and diplomatic engagement in reclaiming cultural identity in global heritage discourse.

Keywords: Safavid Era; Material Heritage; Museum Collections; National Heritage; World Museums; Azerbaijani Culture; Ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

The Safavid period (early 16th–mid-18th century) represents a defining era in the development of Azerbaijani culture. Established by Shah Ismail at a young age, the Safavid state unified almost the entire territories of present-day Azerbaijan and Iran, along with parts of Georgia, Turkey, and Iraq, forming a vast and diverse empire. Predominantly inhabited by Turkic peoples and enriched by other ethnic groups, this region became the setting for the emergence of a distinctive and enduring cultural identity. During this period, Azerbaijani traditions in crafts, literature, music, and architecture—rooted in earlier centuries—were further developed and refined, achieving unprecedented sophistication.

The period is particularly noted for remarkable achievements in miniature painting, carpet weaving, music, arts, and architecture. Many artifacts produced in these fields are preserved in world museums and collections, displayed in galleries, and recognized internationally for their artistic value. Despite this global recognition, the Azerbaijani origin of many Safavid-era artifacts is often obscured under broader cultural classifications.

Research Problem and Hypothesis: Although Safavid-era artifacts of Azerbaijani origin are widely preserved in world museums, they are frequently misrepresented under general cultural labels, which obscures their Azerbaijani identity. This study hypothesizes that a systematic historical and ethnographic analysis can reveal the true cultural affiliation of these artifacts and clarify the contributions of Azerbaijani Turks to the Safavid cultural heritage.

The purpose of this article is to examine Azerbaijani cultural achievements during the Safavid era through the analysis of artifacts preserved in world museums, emphasizing their global significance and advocating for a more accurate representation of their cultural origins. By doing so, the study also highlights the broader importance of initiatives aimed at preserving

and promoting cultural heritage.

Interest in Safavid culture and art attracted international scholarly attention from the early 20th century onwards. The Azerbaijani scholar Nizami Suleymanov, in his monograph “*The Azerbaijani*

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Safavid State in the 17th Century (Based on the Diaries of J. Chardin, J. B. Tavernier, P. D. Valle, and E. Kemper)”, provides a detailed account of the state’s structure, administration, economy, crafts, trade, and cultural life, drawing on European travel diaries (Suleymanov, 2021). These sources illuminate the context in which Azerbaijani cultural practices flourished under the Safavids.

Chardin’s observations on mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, miniature painting, medicine, music, architecture, education, calligraphy, history, sports, clothing, cuisine, customs, weaponry, language, trade, state structure, and governance remain invaluable primary sources for historians and scholars in multiple disciplines.

Subsequent studies, including “*A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present*” edited by Harari, Ralph, and Ettingshausen (1938); Maurice S. Demand’s “*A Handbook of Muhammadan Art*” (1958); Stuart Cary Welch’s “*The Islamic World*” (1987); and Ronald W. Ferrier’s “*Arts of Persia*” (1989), primarily focus on Persian, Islamic, or Iranian culture. Nevertheless, careful examination reveals substantial evidence of Azerbaijani contributions, underscoring the need to reassess and accurately acknowledge the role of Azerbaijani Turks in shaping the artistic and cultural landscape of the Safavid era.

METHODOLOGY

In order to address the research problem, this article adopts an interdisciplinary methodological framework situated at the intersection of history, ethnography, and heritage studies. The research builds on the historical-ethnographic method, but also incorporates theoretical perspectives from museum studies and postcolonial heritage discourse. This approach is particularly useful because it allows for the analysis of how Azerbaijani Safavid artifacts are both preserved as tangible heritage and simultaneously reinterpreted or misrepresented in global institutions.

The primary sources of evidence include European travellers’ diaries (Chardin, Tavernier, Jenkinson, Barbaro, Struys), which not only provide direct descriptions of Safavid society but also reflect the perceptions and biases of outsiders. These are analyzed alongside visual ethnographic data—museum catalogues, archival images, and contemporary digital collections—allowing for a comparative evaluation of the artifacts’ provenance and stylistic features. The cross-referencing of these sources with Azerbaijani ethnographic traditions helps establish stronger links between the objects and their cultural identity.

In parallel, the study engages with secondary sources from heritage and museum studies. Concepts of representation, cultural appropriation, and Orientalism (Said, 1978) provide interpretive tools for understanding why Azerbaijani heritage has often been subsumed under broader categories such as “Persian” or “Islamic.” By applying these theoretical perspectives, the article moves beyond descriptive cataloguing and situates the discussion in wider academic debates about cultural ownership and identity.

Finally, the analysis is structured around four interrelated dimensions: (1) provenance—determining the geographical and cultural origin of artifacts; (2) stylistic and symbolic features—examining motifs, inscriptions, and production techniques; (3) museum labeling practices—assessing the terminology used in exhibition narratives; and (4) identity discourse—exploring the implications of mislabeling for Azerbaijani cultural heritage and diplomacy. This comprehensive methodology ensures that the study contributes not only to national historiography but also to global conversations on heritage representation.

1. Development of Azerbaijani Culture During The Safavid Period

The Safavids were composed of Turkmen tribes known as Qizilbash, and in 1501, under the leadership of Ismail, they captured Tabriz and founded the state. Within a decade, not only Azerbaijan but also the whole of Iran and Iraq came under Safavid rule. Consolidating the borders of the state, the shah

concentrated control over the arts, literature, music, crafts, and trade within his own hands. The most renowned scholars and artists flocked to the royal court. Shah Ismail himself composed poetry under the pen name *Khatai*. His son, Shah Tahmasib, who had studied painting at a young age, became an active patron of the art of the book. During his reign, painters from the Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu, and Timurid courts were gathered together, and their collaboration contributed to the emergence of a new Safavid style of painting.

The Safavid shahs-maintained workshops for painting, carpet weaving, and other crafts. Inspired by the designs created there, luxurious textiles and carpets—especially from silk—were produced. By the 17th century, rows of floral motifs had become a fashionable design for textiles in Iran, India, and Turkey.

Let us consider a few examples of Azerbaijani cultural artifacts that adorn museums and galleries worldwide. The depicted panel illustrates fantastical combinations of flowers emerging from pools of coiled waves. The serrated edges of the leaves may also reflect the influence of the *saz* style, popular in Turkey. Safavid weavers of this era were especially skilled at creating intricate compositions. Safavid velvets were among the finest fabrics sold on international markets.

The most prominent ruler and greatest patron of the arts during the Safavid period was Shah Abbas I (1587–1629). His reign was marked by military and political reforms as well as cultural flourishing. In the early 17th century, thanks to his reforms, the Safavid forces finally managed to defeat the Ottoman army. The recovery of territories and the reorganization of the state brought lasting stability to the empire. In 1597–98, Shah Abbas moved the capital to Isfahan in the south of the empire and constructed a new city alongside the old one. The newly built center was called *Meydan-i Shah*. Over the next few decades, magnificent monuments were erected on three sides of the square by Shah Abbas and his successors. Their walls were decorated with blue and turquoise tiles.

The work “*Poetry Recitation in a Garden*” was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in the Hagop Kevorkian Special Exhibitions Gallery during the 1993–1994 exhibition “*Persian Tiles*”. The work represents a fragment from the *Cahannama Pavilion*, built by Shah Abbas along the *Chahar Bagh* garden avenue in Isfahan. The composition includes Chinese-style blue-and-white boat-shaped vessels filled with fruits and drinks. Two men are shown seated in conversation—one is writing and holding a long-format book—while beside them stands another man, and on the right, a woman carrying a covered bowl decorated with Chinese motifs. The patterned robes, silk sashes, and striped turbans resemble the garments depicted in Safavid paintings of the 17th century.

Inscribed on the tile panel in manuscript form is a verse from a *ghazal* or *qasida* by the famous Persian poet Hafiz of Shiraz:

“*O king of the virtuous,
I cry out from the pain of separation,
My being suffers with heartache, the time has come for your return.*”

At the Leubsdorf Gallery of Hunter College, New York, during the 2008 exhibition “*Re-Orientations: Islamic Art and the West in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*,” a beautifully crafted pen case was displayed. The Safavid artist Haji Muhammad engraved his signature on the object. The European-style landscape on the inner lid of the box is associated with the style of the artist and his family members, most notably his brother Muhammad Zaman. The high status granted to calligraphy and the art of writing in the Islamic world inspired the production of many elegant accessories such as this pen case.

Exquisite examples of woodcraft, including such pen boxes, caskets, and chests, are also preserved in the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan. One casket, measuring 15×6×10 cm, is decorated with miniature scenes on each side, depicting various themes. These scenes are highly valuable for the study of 17th-century Azerbaijani domestic culture. For example, in one composition, a young man’s trousers, shirt, cap, socks, shoes, and sword, as well as the saddle and cloth of the horse,

provide rich ethnographic details. In another, the clothing of a woman similarly offers insights into the fashion and lifestyle of the Safavid period (Hasanova, 2024, p.148).

2. Silk Production In Azerbaijan During The Safavid Period

The favourable natural conditions of Azerbaijan, particularly the abundance of mulberry trees, encouraged the breeding of silkworms and the development of sericulture. As early as the 6th century, high-quality silk was produced in Azerbaijan, highly valued, and traded across long distances. The passage of the Great Silk Road through this region, which connected East and West, also contributed to the flourishing of the silk trade in the country. European travellers and diplomats frequently mentioned the concentration of silk workshops in major cities such as Shamakhi, Shaki, Shusha, and Tabriz. The complex production process of silk and its elasticity compared to other fabrics made it highly valuable. Luxurious headgear, *kalaghayi* scarves, shawls, outer garments, and decorative household items were produced from silk and sold at high prices.

Today, traces of Azerbaijani silk craftsmanship can be found in major exhibition halls worldwide. One such example is the exhibition “*Fashioning an Empire: Textiles from Safavid Iran*” held in 2024 in Doha, the capital of Qatar. The exhibition, organized at the Museum of Islamic Art, was based on cooperation between Qatar’s innovation and design hub M7 and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art in Washington. The fascinating exhibition highlighted the crucial role played by silk during the Safavid era (1501–1736). In an interview, the exhibition’s curator, Nicoletta Fazio, described its message as follows:

“I think one of the key messages is that objects actually participated in shaping historical events far more than we tend to imagine. Something that looks very fragile, complex, and delicate could in fact be the backbone of an empire, truly building its wealth and power. One can build an empire through trade—this means not only dressing people but also creating the soul or identity of a country.” (Qatar Museums, n.d.-a).

Let us consider some of the works displayed at the exhibition “*Fashioning an Empire: Textiles from Safavid Iran*.” One textile, designed and signed by Shafi Abbasi (1628–1674), was woven in Isfahan in the mid-17th century from silk interlaced with metal threads.

Shah Abbas I monopolized the revenues from international silk trade, as income from it was substantial. Within the Safavid Empire, the largest centers of silk production were in Shirvan, Karabakh, Gilan, and Mazandaran. European merchants and travellers often expressed great interest in silk production in Azerbaijan. For instance, Anthony Jenkinson, the head of an English Muscovy Company trade expedition to Azerbaijan in 1561–1563, wrote in his diary that Shirvan’s main local product was silk of various kinds, and that raw silk was abundant there (Suleymanov, 2021, p.146; 7, Jenkinson, 1961, p.113).

From 1538 onward, Shamakhi became the political and administrative center of the Shirvan beylerbeylik. The widespread development of sericulture in this region made it the silk hub of the South Caucasus. The northern trade route passed through Shamakhi, which stimulated domestic trade. The Dutch traveler Jan Struys noted the intensive trade relations between Shamakhi and Niyazabad, Shabran, and Derbent, as well as the presence of wealthy local merchants in the city (Suleymanov, 2021, p.193; 7, Jenkinson, 1961, p.243).

At the state level, economic measures were undertaken not only to encourage trade but also to remove obstacles hindering the development of crafts. In 1547, after the capture of Tbilisi, Shah Tahmasib I (1524–1576) issued a decree regulating units of measure and weight, trade practices in shops and caravanserais, and, in particular, the conditions of craft industries based on a charter (Suleymanov, 2021, p.163). During his reign, reforms were carried out to strengthen the domestic market, develop commodity-money relations, and expand crafts. He abolished the *mal-i-mohtarife* tax paid by artisans on manufactured goods, as well as the *tamgha* customs duty levied when artisans sold their products in

domestic markets (Suleymanov, 2021, p.163). Such decrees increased artisans' trust in the state and contributed to the flourishing of craft industries.

3. Metalworking Art In Azerbaijan During The Safavid Period

During the Safavid period, metalworking art in Azerbaijan also reached significant development. This included copperwork, jewelry, weapon-making, and the production of armor. Among the exhibits preserved in the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan is a copper basin belonging to Shah Tahmasib I, notable for its fine decoration. Another valuable artifact from the same period is a delicately crafted ewer with dragon-headed handles, preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, USA. This vessel, dating to the reign of Shah Tahmasib I, was displayed in the exhibition "*The King's Book of Kings: Shah Tahmasp's Shahnama of 1528*" held between May 4 and December 31, 1972, and again in "*The Nature of Islamic Ornament II: Plant Designs*" from September 10, 1998, to January 10, 1999.

The lower part of the vessel, covered with intricate silver and gold inlay, bears an inscription. It is a dedication to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. On the museum's website, scholars note:

"Since the Shi'a Muslim community held Ali in special reverence, it is assumed that this ewer was created in the early 16th century for a Shi'a ruler of the Safavid dynasty." (Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.).

One of the most important branches of metalwork craftsmanship was the production of arms and armor. Since ancient times, Azerbaijan had been considered one of the largest centers of weapon-making in the Near and Middle East. As early as the 15th century, armor was manufactured for cavalrymen and their warhorses. Cavalry armor consisted of four iron parts joined together with rings: a breastplate, a backplate, and two arm guards. Special holes were made in the arm guards to secure them on the arms. These armors were decorated with fine ornaments, and even Qur'anic verses about warfare were inscribed on them.

From the late 15th century, in a place called Beshkuy on a high hill near Tabriz, cavalry armors were produced. The entire local population specialized in armor-making, and the secrets of the production techniques were carefully guarded. The Venetian envoy Josaphat Barbaro wrote:

"In this country, of course, armor is produced in other places as well, but none are as good as those made in Beshkuy." (Suleymanov, 2021, p. 176; Barbaro, 1970, p.76).

The works of Azerbaijani weapon-makers are preserved in many of the world's most famous museums, including Turkey's Military Museum and Topkapi Palace Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the USA, and the State Hermitage Museum in Russia. These collections hold warrior masks, knee and arm guards, helmets, armors, and horse armors dating from the 15th to the 18th centuries.

In 2015, based on the materials held in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a book titled "*Islamic Arms and Armor in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*" was published, authored by Stuart W. Pyhrr. The book includes many valuable artifacts from the periods of the Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu, Shirvanshahs, and Safavids of Azerbaijan. Among them, the armors and helmets of Aq Qoyunlu ruler Hasan Padishah Bayandur and Shirvanshah Farrukh Yassar stand out as exquisite masterpieces of Azerbaijani craftsmanship (Alexander, Pyhrr, & Kwiatkowski, 2015).

4. Discussion

The Safavid Empire, which lasted for nearly three centuries, continued later under the dynasties of the Afshars and the Qajars, during which time the primary ruling elite of the state still consisted of Azerbaijani Turks. Within the empire, the Turkic language, culture, literature, and art flourished, contributing significantly to world civilization.

The unique cultural treasures of Azerbaijan—its carpets, silk products, copperwork, and jewelry—left visible marks on the European Renaissance and today occupy irreplaceable places in the world's most famous museums and in private collections. Some of these artifacts have been temporarily brought back to the country for exhibitions. For example, exhibitions such as *"The Heritage of the Shirvanshahs in World Museums,"* *"Uzun Hasan – The Ruler of the Aq Qoyunlu Dynasty,"* and *"The Splendor of Azerbaijani Carpets: Treasures of the Safavid Period"* have been held. However, their number remains very limited, and they represent only a small part of the cultural heritage of the Safavid era. The repatriation and promotion of these magnificent cultural masterpieces require the support of the state, civil society, researchers, and entrepreneurs alike.

Yet, when analyzing the representation of this cultural heritage in global museums, one immediately encounters contradictions. On the one hand, museums proudly display Safavid artifacts as examples of artistic refinement and world-class craftsmanship. On the other hand, these same objects are frequently detached from their Azerbaijani origin and placed under generalized categories such as *Persian art* or *Islamic art*. This duality raises a critical question: does the act of mislabeling dilute historical truth and national identity, or does it simply reflect broader regional frameworks used by curators?

From a heritage studies perspective, such labeling practices are not neutral. Postcolonial scholars have long argued that museum narratives mirror power structures: dominant cultures have historically shaped the way “others” are represented. Edward Said’s concept of *Orientalism* highlights how the West often collapsed diverse Eastern traditions into a single monolithic “Orient.” Applying this to Safavid artifacts, one sees how Azerbaijani cultural contributions became overshadowed by a more politically dominant “Persian” narrative that suited both Western curatorial practices and Iranian national historiography.

However, some may argue that museums, when labeling artifacts, do not always intend to deny cultural ownership. Instead, curators often adopt practical frameworks that reflect the geographic or dynastic umbrella under which objects were produced. For instance, artifacts created in Tabriz during the reign of Shah Abbas may be categorized as “Safavid, Iran” simply because the capital of the empire was moved to Isfahan. From this angle, museum practice reflects administrative geography rather than ethnic identity. But such explanations still fall short, because they ignore the ethnic and cultural roots of the artisans, many of whom were Azerbaijani Turks.

A second layer of the discussion involves cultural diplomacy. Cultural heritage today functions as soft power, shaping the image of nations on the global stage. If Safavid carpets, silks, or weapons are consistently presented as Iranian or “Islamic,” Azerbaijan’s contribution to world civilization risks being marginalized. Correct recognition would not only restore historical accuracy but also strengthen Azerbaijan’s cultural visibility internationally. Here, one must ask: should Azerbaijan seek formal agreements with museums for co-attribution? Could joint catalogues or digital databases present a fairer representation by acknowledging multiple cultural affiliations?

Another important dimension is heritage ownership and repatriation. Some argue for the return of artifacts to their places of origin, citing UNESCO conventions. Others stress the value of keeping them in world museums, where they reach broader audiences. For Azerbaijan, the key issue may not be full repatriation but rather recognition and visibility. Co-curated exhibitions, traveling displays, and shared narratives could serve as middle-ground solutions that balance global accessibility with national identity.

Finally, the discussion highlights a deeper epistemological issue: how do we define cultural ownership in multi-ethnic empires? The Safavid state was vast, and its heritage was shaped by many communities. However, denying the Azerbaijani core of this dynasty erases a fundamental part of its history. Thus, while museums may prefer broader categorizations, scholars and policymakers must insist on nuanced interpretations that restore the Azerbaijani dimension of Safavid heritage.

CONCLUSION

During the course of this research, it became evident that a great number of unique works belonging to the Safavid period of Azerbaijan are dispersed across various museums around the world. Thanks to online access to the collections of some museums, we had the opportunity to directly view and study these objects. Information about other artifacts was obtained through scholarly literature and media reports.

However, in none of the available resources was it explicitly stated that this cultural heritage directly belongs to the Azerbaijani people. Instead, these masterpieces are displayed under general labels such as "*Islamic Culture*," "*Eastern Culture*," or "*Persian Culture*." It is the responsibility of researchers to prove their connection to Azerbaijan. Professional scholars familiar with the material and spiritual heritage of the Azerbaijani people can identify and confirm their ethnic identity through features such as symbols, inscriptions, intended usage, production techniques, and regions of distribution.

In conclusion, this study highlights several important findings that emerged during the research:

Richness of Safavid-era Azerbaijani culture – Miniature painting, carpet weaving, silk production, metalwork, and household objects confirm Azerbaijan's invaluable contributions to world civilization during the Safavid period.

Problem of mislabeling in museums – Artifacts preserved in leading museums are frequently categorized under general terms such as "Islamic," "Persian," or "Oriental," which obscures their Azerbaijani identity.

Postcolonial heritage perspective – Such museum practices reflect orientalist approaches in global heritage discourse, where the diversity of local cultures is often subsumed under generalized categories.

Methodological result – Historical sources, travelogues, museum catalogues, and ethnographic comparisons demonstrate the Azerbaijani origins of numerous artifacts.

National identity and diplomacy – Correct representation of Safavid heritage is not only an academic concern but also a matter of cultural diplomacy that reinforces Azerbaijan's rightful place in global narratives.

Alternative viewpoints – While some argue that broad classifications are necessary for global museum practice, they should not erase specific cultural roots or identities.

Practical pathways – Even if full repatriation is not always feasible, joint exhibitions, digital heritage platforms, and multilayered labeling practices offer viable alternatives.

Scientific innovation – This article provides a novel attempt to systematize Safavid artifacts through the prism of Azerbaijani cultural identity while critically assessing international museum practices.

Future research directions – Further interdisciplinary studies, archival research, and collaboration with international institutions are required to enhance recognition of Azerbaijan's role in Safavid heritage.

Recommendations:

Accurate museum labeling: Artifacts should be presented with multilayered identifiers (e.g., "*Safavid, Azerbaijan/Iran, 16–17th centuries*") instead of generic categories.

Azerbaijani academic and cultural institutions should engage directly with museums to correct attributions.

International collaboration: Azerbaijani scholars should co-curate exhibitions, co-author catalogues, and publish with international partners to establish accurate cultural affiliations.

Digital heritage platforms

A unified open-access digital archive should be created to document Safavid-era Azerbaijani artifacts worldwide, including provenance, descriptions, and images.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives: The Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan should use diplomatic channels and international platforms (UNESCO, ICOM) to promote correct representation of Azerbaijani heritage.

Academic and educational programs: Universities should introduce specialized courses on Safavid heritage, establish research fellowships, and create exchange opportunities for young scholars.

Exhibitions and temporary repatriation: Temporary returns of artifacts for exhibitions in Azerbaijan (e.g., “Safavid Heritage Days”) should be organized to foster national awareness and pride.

New research avenues: Detailed studies of inscriptions, symbols, ornamentation, and production techniques should be expanded to support Azerbaijani attribution.

Comparative analyses of Safavid influence on European Renaissance art and trade should be pursued.

Public awareness and outreach: Documentaries, digital storytelling, and public lectures should be used to inform society about Azerbaijani cultural treasures preserved abroad.

Educational materials for schools should include visual and digital resources from global museum collections.

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