The wall paintings at the Chihil Sutun in Isfahan are the best preserved of Persian mural decorations; they include intriguing narrative paintings of historical subject matter in addition to the conventional literary themes and scenes of courtly life (fig. 1). When Chardin visited the palace in 1666 he mentions seeing the four largest of them in the audience hall which he described as depicting three royal entertainments and one battle scene. The evidence of Chardin’s description is to some extent the basis for the common scholarly consensus that the large narrative paintings were added some twenty years after the completion of the building in 1647. This view relies on the stylistic differences between the small paintings on the lower tiers of the audience hall, in the small corner rooms and the verandas, on the one hand, and the large reception and battle scenes on the upper walls of the audience hall, on the other. The traditional style of Persian painting distinguishes the first group from the “Europeanizing” style — modulation with shading, cast shadows, perspectival rendition of the
setting and objects — seen in the second. Such a hypothesis does not consider the iconographic relevance of the wall paintings to the building and its intended function during the time of its construction. Accordingly, these wall paintings remain as no more than generic visual equivalents of Persian hyperbole on the merits of feasting and wine drinking.

As we shall see, the location and themes of the wall paintings at the Chihil Sutun were governed by a deliberate scheme. In this scheme, the events documenting the relations between the Safavid court and its eastern neighbors are depicted in the audience hall which is at the center of the building. Royal feasts and literary themes of romance are relegated to the small corner rooms, the private domain of the palace. The presence of foreigners at the cosmopolitan Safavid court is evoked in the paintings of the verandas. Throughout the building, the small paintings of feasting and hunt reinforce the image of a life of leisure and plenty.

The Chihil Sutun was the largest palace within the confines of the Daulatkhana, the palace precinct, in Isfahan (fig. 2). Completed in 1647 by Shah Abbas II, the palace became the site of large formal receptions for ambassadors and for Persian New Year festivities. The rectangular building, measuring 57.80 by 37.00 meters, was located in the midst of a lush garden with pools and water channels. It consists of a large masonry hall with attendant rooms and a tâlâr front of wooden columns supporting a roof. The tâlâr on the east opens on three sides with eighteen slender wooden columns and a small pool in the center. Behind the tâlâr, two long and narrow rooms flank a rectangular porch. The open face of this porch rests on two additional columns. The rear ensemble of the building includes a long triple-vaulted hall, four small rooms on its corners with four corresponding rooms on the second floor, two long verandas on its north and south borders, and two iwans on its east and west sides, the eastern iwan opening onto the porch.

Wall paintings constitute the most important part of the palace’s decorative program. The overall scheme of the wall paintings in the interior as well as the verandas and the back iwan consists of floral and arabesque motifs depicted on the framing bands, architraves, spandrels of the niches, and the interior surfaces of the vaults; figural

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Fig. 2. The Chihil Sutun. View from the northeast.