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Original Research Article

The Role of the Murals of the Chehel Sotoun Palace in Representing Soft Power during the Safavid Period

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Abstract

Introduction: During the Safavid period, art and architecture served as strategic tools to convey soft power. The Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan, with its ceremonial, convivial, and martial murals, not only narrates political and cultural events but also plays a role within Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of soft power in establishing political legitimacy, enhancing cultural appeal, and conveying diplomatic messages. The aim of this research is to analyze a network of visual, spatial, and material implications in three significant murals of the Safavid Chehel Sotoun Palace, which have been influential in shaping the discourse of Safavid authority. The principal research question is: «How do these murals, through ritual signs, spatial arrangement, and material symbols, engage in the production and representation of soft power within Nye's theoretical framework, focusing on the three sources of culture, political values, and foreign policy?»

Research Method: The present research employs a descriptive-analytical, qualitative approach. Data were collected through library sources, historical documents, and archival images. Three selected murals were examined using Joseph Nye's soft power framework, employing a descriptive–interpretive analysis of visual and spatial elements, with emphasis on the three components of culture, political values, and foreign policy.

Findings: The results indicate that the cultural component, through the integration of rituals, attire, luxurious objects, and musical elements, has transformed the flourishing of Safavid culture into an attractive and influential factor. In terms of political values, the king's central position, the orderly arrangement, and the precise composition of the scenes convey a sense of theatrical authority and divine legitimacy. The foreign policy component, by emphasizing the grandeur of ceremonial receptions and the imagery of military victories, has conveyed messages of trust, unity, and deterrence, transforming visual art into a tool for cultural diplomacy.

Conclusion: The interaction of these three components (cultural, political values, and foreign policy) reveals a synergistic model of Safavid soft power, which, through cultural appeal, political cohesion, and communication strategies, simultaneously establishes an attractive and authoritative image of the Safavid government in the minds of both local and foreign audiences.

Keywords

Mural; Chehel Sotoun Palace; Soft Power; Safavid Era; Joseph Nye

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Introduction and Problem Definition

The Safavids, by combining religious authority, artistic splendor, and unified resource management, created a historical model of the intertwining of culture and politics in the process of legitimizing power; a model that holds special significance in the history of Iranian art. Chehel Sotoun Palace, as one of the most prominent ceremonial and diplomatic spaces, is not merely a royal building but a multi-layered medium for conveying messages of symbolic authority, prosperity, and cultural superiority. The combination of ceremonial architecture, convivial-martial murals, and luxurious objects has transformed this space into an effective tool for attracting and persuading audiences both domestically and internationally; a tool that, according to Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, can shape audience preferences without coercion. The majority of previous studies on Chehel Sotoun have focused on the aesthetic description of the works or the reinterpretation of historical events, and rarely have they addressed them as a cultural-political strategy within the framework of soft power theory. In particular, the synergistic role of ritual signs, spatial organization, and material objects in producing the discourse of legitimacy and Safavid cultural diplomacy has not yet been examined within an integrated framework. In the absence of such an integrated approach, reinterpreting the murals of the Chehel Sotoun Palace based on three sources of soft power from Nye's perspective—culture, political values, and foreign policy—emerges as a scientific necessity, serving as an analytical framework for organizing visual and conceptual evidence. In this research, Nye's theory of soft power is used merely as a conceptual tool to understand the cultural, political, and communicative functions of Safavid art. Such an approach can reveal the subtle mechanisms by which art attracts, legitimizes, and represents authority; mechanisms whose understanding is fundamentally important for art history and cultural policy studies. The main research question is how the murals of the Chehel Sotoun Palace of the Safavid era, through ritual signs, spatial arrangement, and material symbols, within the theoretical framework of soft power, and focusing on three sources, culture, political values, and foreign policy, produce and represent soft power? The aim of this research is to identify and analyze a network of visual, spatial, and material significations in three prominent murals of the Safavid Chehel Sotoun Palace, which, through their interaction, have shaped the discourse of Safavid authority and have acted as a historical model of the strategic link between art and politics.

Research Method

This study used a descriptive–analytical, qualitative approach. Data were collected through library-based research employing theoretical sources, historical documents, and archival images of the murals of Chehel Sotoun Palace. The statistical population of the research consists of all Safavid-period murals preserved in Chehel Sotoun Palace, Isfahan, that are accessible through visual and archival sources. The sample was selected purposively based on criteria such as historical-political significance, the direct relevance of the subject matter to components of soft power, and the degree of preservation and visual legibility. Accordingly, three prominent murals, including «The Reception of Humayun, the King of India, by Shah Tahmasp», «The Reception of Nadr Muhammad Khan, the King of Turkestan, by Shah Abbas II», and «The Battle of Merv between Shah Ismail I and Shaybani Khan the Uzbek», were chosen as case studies. The analysis of the murals in this research was carried out on the basis of Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of soft power. In this process, each work was first examined through a precise description of its visual elements and spatial composition, including the position of the Shah, the arrangement of figures,

ceremonial objects, and the relationship between architecture and event. Subsequently, the cultural, political, and diplomatic functions of these elements were interpreted on the basis of historical evidence and Safavid-period texts, and the findings were organized within Nye's three sources of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004, 11). Thus, the research method is grounded in visual and spatial content analysis and employs Nye's soft power theory to classify and explain the role of each element in representing authority, legitimacy, and cultural attraction in the Safavid era.

Research Background

Among the studies related to the present research is the article by «Nouri et al.» (2023), entitled «Identification of Components of Power Exercise in Safavid Garden Paintings». Using Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, the authors examined the visual and spatial elements of the garden as means of representing central authority, analyzing the ruler's position, spatial composition, and cultural-political signs. «Maazallahi and Saber» (2023), in their article entitled «Analyzing the Hidden Themes of Pictures of Bazm in the Small Murals of the Central Hall of Chehel Sotoun Palace», employed a descriptive-analytical method and demonstrated that the omission of architectural and musical elements and the emphasis on vessels of consumption reflect the Safavid economic-political discourse and the notion of exclusive consumption. Similarly, «Mehdipur and Soheili» (2022), in the artilcle entitled «Analysis of Social Relations in the Diplomatic Architecture of the Safavid Period Based on the Space Syntax Approach (Case Study: Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan», utilized space syntax methodology to examine the correlation between the spatial organization of halls—permeability, transparency, and spatial depth—and their social and political functions. «Babaei» (1994), in the article entitled «Shah Abbas II, the Conquest of Qandahar, Chehel Sotoun and Its Wall Paintings», analyzed the wall paintings of Chehel Sotoun Palace in relation to the conquest of Qandahar and the political-ceremonial function of the reception hall. By emphasizing the distinction between the traditional style of small paintings (associated with convivial gatherings and literary subjects) and the Europeanizing style of large-scale paintings (depicting historical events and battles), she demonstrates that the placement of historical scenes within the decorative program of the building was determined according to a deliberate plan to display Safavid power and foreign relations. «Canby» (2009), in the article entitled «Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran», focuses on court arts, the urban development of Isfahan, and the visual culture of the reign of Shah Abbas I, showing how Safavid architecture, painting, luxury objects, and ceremonial rituals conveyed a political and cultural image to foreign audiences. A number of studies have also addressed the application of soft power theory in the fields of art and cultural heritage. For instance, «Hoogwaerts» (2016), in «Museums, Exchanges and Their Contribution to Joseph Nye's Concept of Soft Power», examines the role of museums as «institutions of memory» in cultural diplomacy. Through case studies such as the exchange of the Cyrus Cylinder between Iran and the British Museum, the author demonstrates how the display of historical and artistic objects can, without recourse to coercive instruments, create a space for mutual respect and open diplomatic channels. Likewise, «Al-Mhanawi and Razawa» (2023), in «Visual Arts as an Effective Soft Power influening the Formulation of Concepts of Peace and Coexistence», drawing upon Nye's theoretical framework, argue that visual arts (such as cinema and theatre) function as strategic instruments influencing the audience's subconscious and shaping concepts of peace and coexistence, thereby serving as an alternative to hard power. Although these studies focus on the modern era or newer media, they confirm the visual arts' considerable capacity within the theoretical framework of soft

power. Despite these contributions, no independent research has yet specifically examined the murals of Chehel Sotoun Palace within Joseph Nye's soft power framework, focusing on a precise analysis of visual elements and spatial organization. The necessity of the present study can be explained from two perspectives: first, rereading the Safavid visual heritage in light of Nye's soft power theory, which enables historical comparison and understanding of non-military mechanisms of influence; second, the importance of Chehel Sotoun Palace as a prominent example of the interaction between art, architecture, and politics, whose study may contribute to the development of interdisciplinary approaches in art history and cultural studies. By employing descriptive-interpretive analysis of visual elements and spatial analysis, the present research seeks to present a model of how the Safavids utilized cultural and artistic capacities to consolidate and expand soft power.

Theoretical Framework

Joseph S. Nye, a prominent theorist of international relations, originated a concept that systematically addresses the immaterial sources of power and provides the first operational model for understanding the cultural, value-based, and symbolic mechanisms of political influence. In the literature of international relations, although other theorists have also considered the role of culture and symbols in power, their approaches have generally been discursive or structural. The advantage of Nye's approach lies in his classification of the sources of soft power into three distinct categories—culture, political values, and foreign policy—thereby enabling their transformation into analyzable indicators in historical and visual contexts. Accordingly, for the study of the murals of Chehel Sotoun Palace, which, beyond their cultural and artistic layers, also carry political and diplomatic messages of legitimation, Nye's theory provides an efficient, precise, and operational framework. Joseph Nye defines «soft power» as the ability to shape the preferences of others without resorting to coercion or threat (Nye, 2004, 5). In his view, hard power derives from military or economic capability to compel others to act in ways they otherwise would not, whereas soft power arises from attraction and legitimacy (Nye, 2004, 2 & 11). Nye specifies that soft power rests on three principal sources: culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture becomes a source of soft power when it inspires others or is admired; this attraction may stem from art, historical heritage, literature, and cultural symbols, thereby presenting a positive image of national identity. Political values are effective when they are not only realized domestically but are also recognized as credible beyond national borders, meaning that a nation's political claims and standards must correspond with its internal practices and structures to generate international trust (Nye, 2004, 11). The third component, foreign policy, produces soft power when it is perceived as legitimate and ethical; actions promoting peace, multilateral cooperation, or humanitarian assistance exemplify such legitimacy. According to Nye, these sources become effective only when their positive messages are translated into the state's actual conduct and behavior (Nye, 2004, 14-15). He emphasizes that in today's interconnected world, a country that intelligently employs these three pillars can consolidate trust, enduring influence, and a superior position in the international system. Evidently, Joseph Nye's soft power theory belongs to the era of global communications and modern international relations and should not be directly applied to premodern periods. In the present study, this theory is used solely as a conceptual framework for organizing visual evidence and rereading the cultural-political messages embedded in the murals. From this perspective, Nye's tripartite concepts—culture, political values, and foreign policy—offer an analytical framework for examining the symbolic and diplomatic functions of the murals in a systematic and comparable manner. In the Safavid era, these elements are clearly

evident in the rulers' cultural and artistic policies. Chehel Sotoun Palace, with its ritual and historical murals, not only displays refined Iranian artistic achievement but also functioned as a symbolic instrument of diplomacy, conveying messages of religious legitimacy, royal splendor, and economic prosperity to foreign ambassadors and guests. In accordance with Nye's logic, this constitutes an instance of generating «attraction» and enhancing international image through cultural symbols (Nye, 2004, 6). Cultural diplomacy may be defined as the use of diplomatic practice for the promotion and development of culture; in effect, when the way of life of one group, understood as the process through which it has attained maturity, is transmitted to another group, awareness is created through cultural diplomacy. Thus, the diplomatic use of cultural instruments in advancing a country's commercial, political, and strategic interests constitutes cultural diplomacy (Amini & Anami Alamdari, 2012). From the perspective of Nye's soft power, such representations form part of the cultural sources and political values that, provided they align with the government's actual conduct, can generate lasting attraction and influence. The operational model of this research, within Nye's theoretical framework, is based on the analysis of two categories of signs: 1. Signs of objects and material elements, including luxurious garments, vessels, weapons, gifts, and symbols of opulence that display prosperity and cultural-economic resources. These reflect the cultural source of soft power in Nye's formulation. 2. Signs of space and arrangement, including scene composition, the placement of figures, and spatial organization that convey order, authority, and magnificence. These aspects correspond to Nye's emphasis on legitimacy and attraction through coherent representation. The combination of these two categories of signs with Nye's theory enables the extraction of meaning within the Safavid cultural-political context; meanings that operate not merely at the aesthetic level but in service of strengthening attraction and political influence through art. Accordingly, the present theoretical framework establishes a coherent link between artistic form, symbolic content, and diplomatic function.

Chehel Sotoun Palace in the Safavid Period

The Safavid era (907–1135 A.H.), owing to the state's political power and the stability of its foundations, is regarded as one of the enduring and distinguished periods of Iranian history in the Islamic age. With transformations in global relations and international interactions, Iran's connections with Europe acquired a new form, one consequence of which was the arrival and circulation of foreign ambassadors in Iran. During the reign of Shah Abbas, due to both necessity and the intention to decorate public and private buildings, and with the settlement of Armenians in New Julfa and increased contact with Europeans, attention to the arts experienced unprecedented growth (Pakbaz, 2017, 132). Consequently, the Safavid period was marked by intense political centralization and cultural refinement, during which court architecture and decorative programs served as important instruments for exercising power and disseminating royal ideology. Within this context, Chehel Sotoun Palace in Isfahan, founded by order of Shah Abbas I, became the largest royal building of the Safavid state in Isfahan and a venue for receiving foreign representatives and holding grand ceremonies (Maazallahi & Saber, 2023). Jean Chardin, in his travel account, mentions the presence of ambassadors at Chehel Sotoun Palace (Chardin, 1957, 1288). Likewise, Iskandar Beg Turkman describes the public audience ceremonies of the Safavid state and the arrival of the Russian envoy at the Safavid court (Beg Turkman & Morrekh, 1938, 188). Pietro della Valle also refers to the magnificent Safavid buildings in Isfahan and the royal palace where the Shah hosted foreign ambassadors and guests and where banquets were held. He describes Chehel Sotoun as a manifestation of the grandeur and power of the

Safavid Shah, a place that no one was permitted to pass around or enter freely (Della Valle, 1991, 43). The spatial organization of the palace was designed so that the route of guests, from semi-private areas to the Mirror Hall and finally the principal audience hall, would deliberately display royal magnificence. The Mirror Hall possessed the greatest connectivity and permeability, while the rooms of ministers and courtiers had the greatest spatial depth (Mehdipur & Soheili, 2022, 125); an arrangement that guided visitors toward the central hall as a staged display of royal splendor. The main hall, with its monumental murals depicting convivial scenes, battles, and royal recreations, was the first element to attract newcomers' attention. After the death of Shah Abbas II, European travelers, including Chardin, entered the palace through a long garden approach. Upon reaching the reception area, they encountered guests and officials seated around the audience hall, while the Shah's privileged position was clearly marked by its location directly opposite the entrance (Babaei, 1994, 15). The combination of this purposeful architecture, elaborate ceremonial protocol, and convivial-martial themes transformed Chehel Sotoun Palace into a visual medium that conveyed Safavid soft power, through the display of culture, prosperity, and authority, to both domestic audiences and foreign envoys.

Representation of Soft Power in the Murals of Chehel Sotoun Palace Based on Joseph Nye's Theory

In the mural «The Reception of Humayun, the King of India, by Shah Tahmasp» (Fig. 1), Shah Tahmasp Safavi and Humayun are depicted at the center of the composition upon a green platform. On either side of them appears an orderly row of courtiers, attendants, and servants, some of whom carry golden cups and precious vessels. Musicians with percussion and string instruments and dancers in richly patterned and colorful garments transform the foreground into a ceremonial, rhythmic, and magnificent gathering. The background of the painting, visible through the tall arches of the hall, reveals a view of the Persian garden with straight water channels, orderly trees, and a clear sky; a setting that, aligned with the palace architecture along the garden axes, creates a harmonious and majestic composition.



Fig. 1. The Reception of Humayun, the King of India, by Shah Tahmasp. Source: Aghajani Isfahani & Javani, 2007, 71.

The immediate meaning of this work is the depiction of a formal ceremony for receiving a foreign monarch at the highest level of protocol, which serves as a manifestation of royal dignity and amicable relations between two regional powers. The official formation, symmetrical arrangement of figures, and presence of convivial elements convey mutual respect, with the host's superiority. The image exemplifies assemblies in which the carefully organized visual and behavioral elements display courtly magnificence alongside social cohesion and political harmony, thereby reinforcing the discourse of legitimacy within the

Safavid power structure. The secondary significance of this mural is intertwined with the three principal sources of soft power in Nye's theoretical framework and extends the image into the realm of Safavid political and cultural discourse. From the perspective of legitimacy politics, the central placement of Shah Tahmasp, the symmetrical arrangement of individuals, the measured distance of Humayun from the host, and their enclosure by attendants and servants create a view of unrivaled authority, signifying stability and continuity of royal power for the domestic audience, and presenting to foreign observers an image of Iran as an organized, powerful, secure, and cultured state. In terms of political values, this reception is not merely a friendly meeting but a model of diplomatic management at the highest level, combining mutual respect with the display of order and magnificence, and demonstrating the capacity for coordination between two regional powers. In the domain of cultural attraction, the balanced and vivid color palette, the use of brocaded textiles with floral arabesques, the presence of authentic Iranian architecture with garden-oriented arcades, the calculated spatial arrangement and function of the hall, and the performance of music and dance accompanied by reception with golden and crystal vessels create an environment that transforms political tension and rivalry into cultural convergence and alliance. In effect, the representation of prosperity, abundant resources, and economic flourishing within the pictorial frame consolidates the authority and attractiveness of the Safavid court. Consequently, the mural indirectly reveals Safavid soft power on three levels: political legitimacy through the display of royal ritual, cultural attraction through art and aesthetics, and a policy of attraction through the establishment of relations and alliance with the king of India. Thus, the mural functions not merely as a historical image but as a visual medium of persuasion and attraction which, within Nye's soft power framework, demonstrates the skillful use of cultural and political resources to achieve influence without coercion.



Fig. 2. The Reception of Nadr Muhammad Khan, the Uzbek by Shah Abbas II. Source: Aghajani Isfahani & Javani, 2007, 72.

In the mural «The Reception of Nadr Muhammad Khan, the King of Turkestan, by Shah Abbas II» (Fig. 2), Shah Abbas II is seated at the center of the scene upon a broad platform adorned with fine carpets and valuable vessels. To his right, Nadr Muhammad Khan appears in his traditional, sumptuous attire. Surrounding the two figures is a dense, orderly row of courtiers and foreign guests, arranged symmetrically on both sides, seated or standing. The foreground is rich with banquet details: musicians holding their instruments, dancers depicted in elaborately patterned garments, and attendants carrying cups, pitchers, and trays filled with food and fruit. The diversity and harmony of these elements transform the ceremony into a rhythmic, magnificent, and meticulously organized ritual. The mural's background depicts the palace's interior. The painting is set within a frame decorated with floral arabesque motifs, whose design creates a subtle contrast between the crowded and

highly detailed assembly and the ornamental order of the frame. This floral frame functions as a visual boundary, directing the viewer's gaze from the festive space toward the centrality of the Shah and the foreign guest. The direct meaning of the scene is the display of a formal reception ceremony at an unparalleled level of diplomatic protocol. The precise arrangement of individuals, the calculated use of space, and the coordinated movements of attendants, musicians, and dancers signify institutionalized order, respect, and role conformity among the courtiers, thereby conveying the efficiency of the royal apparatus. Simultaneously, the display affirms the dignity and status of the Shah and reflects the Safavids' capacity to manage international relations. Differences in physiognomy, clothing, and seating position indicate social rank and cultural identity, demonstrating that the ceremony served not only as an official encounter but also as an occasion for the manifestation of identity distinctions. The secondary significance of the work can be interpreted within Joseph Nye's theory of soft power. Nye identifies three principal sources of such power—culture, political values, and policies—which influence audiences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. In this mural, political legitimacy is represented through the authoritative central presence of Shah Abbas and the carefully positioned placement of Nadr Muhammad Khan, surrounded by a circle of attendants: an image symbolizing stability of the power structure for domestic viewers and diplomatic strength for foreign observers. Political values are conveyed through the precise order of the assembly, the measured movements of attendants, and the integration of host and guest cultural elements, communicating respect and harmony. Cultural attraction is manifested in the vivid and coordinated colors of garments, brocaded textiles, musical instruments, and palace ornamentation, transforming the banquet into a space where political rivalry becomes cultural convergence. Through a strategy of displaying magnificence and abundance, the image constitutes a visual example of the intelligent use of cultural and political resources for indirect attraction and influence; a process that Nye defines as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, emphasizing that such influence becomes enduring only when culture, political values, and foreign policies are embodied in a coherent and tangible narrative for the audience (Nye, 2004, 11-14).



Fig. 3. The Battle of Merv between Shah Ismail I and Shaybani Khan the Uzbek.
Source: Aghajani Isfahani & Javani, 2007, 72.

In the mural «The Battle of Merv between Shah Ismail I and Shaybani Khan the Uzbek» (Fig. 3), a dynamic and multilayered scene of a historical battle is presented. The composition is structured around Shah Ismail Safavid: mounted on a white horse and wearing a distinctive helmet, he occupies the center of the mural. Opposite him, Shaybani Khan, the Uzbek, appears on a brown horse in direct confrontation with the Shah. The

figures are distributed across both vertical and horizontal registers: the upper section depicts dense ranks of Safavid and Uzbek forces amid mountains and trees, while the lower section is devoted to hand-to-hand combat and violent clashes. Colorful garments and armor, agile horses, and diverse weapons (swords, spears, and maces), together with dynamic movements, intensify the visual rhythm and the sense of urgency in the scene. The work's direct meaning is the representation of the climactic moment of confrontation between the two commanders and their forces. The pictorial centrality of Shah Ismail, combined with the visual superiority of his position (the bright horse, richly patterned attire, and higher placement in the mural), signifies dominance and even anticipates victory. The density of troops, multiplicity of weapons, and boldness of movement bring the scene close to an actual battlefield. At this level, the mural functions as a ritual-historical record of a decisive battle that played a fundamental role in consolidating Safavid rule. The secondary meaning of the Battle of Merv mural, through the use of saturated and contrasting colors, sumptuous attire, and armor decorated with motifs derived from the Persian painting tradition, elevates the confrontation between Shah Ismail I and Shaybani Khan from a merely military encounter to an epic and symbolic narrative. This visual configuration not only reveals Iranian aesthetics and the historical memory of warfare to domestic and foreign audiences but, in Joseph Nye's terms, transforms culture into an instrument of persuasion and inspiration. Within this artistic expression, the central position of Shah Ismail and the concentration of forces constitute a tangible representation of authority, stability, and political legitimacy in the newly established Safavid order. The loyalty of the soldiers, unity of the ranks, and readiness for sacrifice present an image of charismatic leadership and political unity; elements that Nye considers components of soft power because they strengthen trust and voluntary acceptance among audiences. Moreover, the depiction of victory over a major external power, in this case Shaybani Khan, the Uzbek, extends beyond the mere recording of a historical event and conveys a strategic message to the international sphere: a message that demonstrates deterrent capability, defensive capacity, and readiness to protect territory against external threats. Such a scene, in Nye's formulation, exemplifies an intelligent foreign policy capable of communicating confidence, security, and cooperation to regional and global audiences. Consequently, by integrating cultural magnificence, political cohesion, and the display of defensive capability, the artwork realizes the very process of shaping others' preferences through attraction and credibility, transforming the mural into an effective medium for consolidating and expanding the discourse of Safavid soft power.

Discussion

In the three principal murals of Chehel Sotoun Palace, the arrangement of visual elements, including the placement of figures, garments, objects, and surrounding space, simultaneously conveys meaning and manifests Safavid authority. Together, these elements form an integrated system of historical and political messages that align with the principal sources of soft power in Joseph Nye's theory: culture, political values, and foreign policy. In this analysis, the description and interpretation of visual elements, alongside the spatial analysis of the scenes that possess the greatest explanatory capacity for these three sources, have been identified and correlated with their historical context and ideological function. These signs can communicate both the aesthetic and cultural layers of the works and their political and diplomatic messages. The table below summarizes these findings.

Table 1. Findings from the Three Safavid Murals Based on the Components of Culture, Political Values, and Foreign Policy in Nye's Soft Power Theory. Source: Authors.

Image	Culture	Political Values	Foreign Policies
	Convivial rituals and garden architecture as reflections of Safavid cultural flourishing and convergence.	Orderly formation and the central position of the Shah as a representation of royal legitimacy and unity.	Ceremonial reception as an instrument of diplomatic attraction and consolidation of alliance.
	Symbolic abundance in attire and music as a sign of artistic and economic splendor.	Precise order and composition conveying the efficiency and authority of the royal apparatus.	The display of magnificence as a message of confidence and diplomatic capacity.
	Epic narration with Iranian aesthetics, consolidating the cultural identity of warfare.	Concentration of ranks and the centrality of Shah Ismail as a sign of charismatic leadership legitimacy.	The depiction of victory as a message of deterrence and defensive capability.

Conclusion

Focusing on three prominent Safavid murals, «The Reception of Humayun, the King of India, by Shah Tahmasp», «The Reception of Nadr Muhammad Khan, the King of Turkestan, by Shah Abbas II», and «The Battle of Merv between Shah Ismail I and Shaybani Khan the Uzbek» and drawing upon Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of soft power, this study presents a coherent model of the representation of power in Safavid visual art. The analytical process, moving from the examination of visual and spatial elements to the identification of symbolic and strategic functions, demonstrates that these works were not merely narrations of historical events but deliberate instruments for shaping perception. In the cultural dimension, the integration of ritual practices, symbolic attire, and musical elements transforms artistic appeal and cultural flourishing into an effective factor of attraction and persuasion. At the level of political values, the central position of the Shah and the orderly arrangement of figures convey performative authority and the charismatic legitimacy of monarchy. The foreign policy component, through the magnificence of ceremonial receptions and the depiction of victory in martial scenes, communicates messages such as confidence, alliance, and deterrence, thereby turning art into a mechanism of cultural diplomacy. The combined outcome of these three components reveals a synergistic model of Safavid soft power, one in which the integration of cultural attraction, political cohesion, and communicative strategies establishes a simultaneously appealing

and authoritative image of Safavid rule in the minds of both domestic and foreign audiences. Within the framework of analyzing the murals of Chehel Sotoun Palace, this approach clarifies new dimensions of the cultural and political functions of these works. The originality of the present research lies in proposing a coherent model, with a defined analytical trajectory, demonstrating how culture, politics, and image were strategically interconnected within a specific historical context.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of joint collaboration between the authors, and their respective contributions are as follows: the first author was responsible for research design, data collection, analysis of findings, and drafting the main text of the article; the second author supervised the research process, conducted content review, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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