

# A Voyage to the Iranian Heartlands —Art of the Persian Courts

*The Brooklyn Museum's expert on Islamic art, a member of the EAR advisory board, measures the impact of the US showing of a beautiful array of manuscript paintings from the Art and History Trust Collection of Abol-Ala Soudavar*

In recent months US art circles have been buzzing with increasingly vocal criticisms of 'blockbuster shows' and loan exhibitions in general. Thus the opening of a major exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, entirely drawn from a single collection, invites us to reconsider this question, a particularly important one since it has a bearing on the fate of American as well as international museums in the 1990s.

Rarely has a show comprising objects from a private collection communicated as successfully the passion, perfectionism and historical conception which inspired its formation as does *Art of the Persian Courts: Selections from the Art and History Trust*, Liechtenstein, on view at the Los Angeles County Museum until late January, 1993.

More than 120 works focus on the Art of the Book, as it developed over 600 years in the Iranian heartland and spheres of Persian influence in Central Asia and Mughal India. The selection was made in close collaboration between the collector, Iranian businessman Abol-Ala Soudavar, and Thomas W. Lentz, until recently curator of the department of Ancient and Islamic Art at the museum (see *International Diary*). Dr Lentz brought to the project a profound understanding of the 15th century cultural and political life of Iran, which was evident from an exhibition he curated earlier, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the 15th Century*. (See *EAR* Vol. I No. 7).

*Art of the Persian Courts* is distinguished by the superb quality, provenance and condition of the works on view, which were acquired by Soudavar from the mid-1970s, the most fruitful period during this century for collecting Persian art. Encouraged by the interest shown by the ruling Pahlavis, and most particularly by Empress Farah, by the late 1970s important pieces from great European

collections, such as those of Maurice de Rothschild, the Marquis of Bute, Louis Cartier, the Comtesse de Behague, the English MP Julian Amery, as well as the more recent American collections such as those of Arthur G. Houghton Jr, S. C. Welch and Edwin Binney Jr, had passed into the hands of enthusiastic new collectors.

This Persian passion for collecting art, dormant in recent times, was requited partly due to the royal patronage and partly as a result of the oil boom. A driving force behind this revival of interest was a strong conviction among the collectors of the pre-eminence of Persian art and culture and the importance of restoring this heritage to Persian hands. Of this generation of collectors, Soudavar remains undoubtedly the most passionate, persistent and well-informed—traits which he inherited from generations of familial collecting of the Arts of the Book and appreciation of classical Persian poetry and literature.

Soudavar attributes much of his initial enthusiasm to the research done in the early 1970s by Safavid historian Martin Dickson and the curator-connoisseur of Safavid painting par excellence, S. C. Welch. Equally important, a combination of luck and business acumen allowed the collector to seize opportunities to acquire works which, in his own words, "might not be available again for centuries."

This set of historical circumstances lends special significance to the collection and an accompanying catalogue written by Soudavar, with a contribution on the Mughal paintings by Milo C. Beach, director of the Sackler Gallery of Art. Furthermore, as Thomas Lentz has pointed out, the exhibition and catalogue present a rare opportunity for an American audience to dialogue with an erudite Persian collector willing and able to share his own cultural heritage.

Of course, the exhibition invites

comparison with past shows devoted to collectors and collecting of the arts of this period, such as a series of exhibitions at the Sackler Gallery featuring the Henri Vever Collection, comparisons which will fuel discussion.

However, more than a superb collection of individual paintings and calligraphies, more than a comprehensive survey of the stylistic evolution of Persian painting, the exhibition presents an extraordinary view of history, a vast panorama of the Persian experience.

Besides the educational potential of this approach and its undoubted appeal to connoisseurs already converted to Persian art, the show's intrinsic value lies in the wider context of the presentation of non-western art within American museums. For *Art of the Persian Courts* succeeds where most other shows have had difficulties.

The tone is set by two great Qur'an pages, measuring nearly six feet by four feet, installed at the beginning of the exhibition. Instead of the usual museum presentation, in which calligraphic folios are mounted as works on paper, framed or tacked onto a wall with little indication of their original context, here they are presented as they were meant to be seen and used: cradled in a replica of a giant stone Qur'an stand, made during the 15th century for the Timurid dynasty's main mosque in Samarkand.

The exhibition continues in a series of intimate, interconnected chambers in sombre yet rich colours, which embrace the works of art, instead of overpowering them. Each object is spotlighted and hovers on the wall as if illuminated from within. The galleries are interspersed with small niches in which open manuscripts are displayed at waist level, allowing the viewer a greater intimacy with the object, in a clever simulation of the individual aesthetic experience of the connoisseur.

After an orientation room, in which





*Saadi's argument Comes to Blows (detail). Folio from a manuscript of the Gulistan copied by Mir Imad and signed by Reza Abbasi. Isfahan, ca. 1615. Opaque watercolour and ink on paper. 26.2 x 16 cm.*

text panels and a few well selected objects ranging in date from Ancient to 19th century Iran illustrate the principal themes, such as the Persian ideal, the power of the Persian cultural ethos and traditional attitudes towards learning and the art of calligraphy, the installation proceeds chronologically from the age of the Mongols, the genesis of the Persian illustrated manuscript, to the arts of the Timurid courts and the Safavid period, with its classical synthesis and baroque epilogue.

Of particular interest are a number of late 15th century paintings attributed to Behzad, Persia's greatest painter and his contemporaries, and a section admirably illustrating the complexities of provincial styles in later 16th century painting. The Safavid period is examined from the vantage point of the influence of European art.

The Mughal section is enriched by rare folios from a number of royal albums, which demonstrate the blending of European and Persian painting styles so characteristic of this school. A unique collection of firmans, seals and documents illustrate the use of Persian as the court and administrative language in Mughal India.

The exhibition begins and ends with two magnificent life-size early 19th century royal portraits, one of Fath Ali Shah and the other of Prince Muhammad Ali Mirza Daulatshah, which illustrate the successful evolution of the Persian painting tradition from the miniature to

the monumental.

While the exhibition is called *Art of the Persian Courts*, it really is a survey of the Arts of the Book, with a sprinkling of decorative arts related to the paintings and calligraphy. As such, it provides a rare opportunity to view the Arts of the Book as a whole and over their entire historical development.

No major school, historical period, or format is omitted, although some are more fully represented than others. On view are detached folios treated as great paintings, as would be expected, such as three folios from the Shah Tahmasp *Shahnama* of the 1530s, and a portrait gallery of the dandies, soldiers, maidens and rulers of the time.

Entire manuscripts with royal seals and librarian's comments were collected by Soudavar, who was as much interested in their historical provenance as in their intrinsic artistic impact and condition. Among these are three manuscripts of the *Gulistan* of Saadi. The first, formerly in the Maurice de Rothschild collection, is the only manuscript in private hands illustrated by the Timurid master painters Behzad and Shah Muzaffar; it was the personal copy of the Mughal Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The second *Gulistan*, also copied in the late 15th century but with later Mughal illustrations, acquired from the Marquis of Bute,

likewise was originally in the imperial Mughal collection. A third copy illustrated by Reza Abbasi and copied by Mir Imad in the early 17th century was formerly owned by Adil Shah, a son of Nader Shah Afshar (1737-49).

Calligraphic folios illustrating the great masters are displayed on a par with the paintings, as they were meant to be appreciated. Historical edicts and dedicatory pages communicate to the viewer the Persian passion for learning and poetry. Historical personalities and events emerge, thanks to the interconnectedness of the works on display, aided by the intelligent yet readable labelling.

This is a personal statement as well. Many new attributions and bold ideas are put forth, which offer a challenge to accepted ways of seeing and understanding Persian painting. For instance, illustrated manuscripts previously attributed to Herat of the late 15th century, represented by half of a double page frontispiece from a copy of an anthology of the poetry of Ali Shir Nava'i, are presented as the products of 16th century Persian painting ateliers for a Turkish market eager for lavishly illustrated manuscripts of late 15th century Herat poetry.

The 15th and 16th centuries were the age of the Renaissance in Europe; patrons such as the Medicis, the Borgias and the Duc de Berry inspired perhaps the greatest achievements of humanistic painting. A similar renaissance occurred in Timurid and Safavid Persia which has left us a great artistic legacy, now beautifully evoked and sympathetically interpreted by this exhibition.

For those who cannot fly by plane or by carpet to Los Angeles, the scholarly and lavishly illustrated 424-page catalogue will have to suffice. See listing.

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#### **Clockwise:**

*Rustam's First Ordeal: Rakhsh Slays a Lion (detail), from the Shahnama of Ferdowsi. Attributed to Mir Musavvar. Tabriz, ca. 1525. Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper. 47 x 31.8 cm.*

*Birth of a Prince (detail). Attributed to Behzad, ca. 1485. Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper. 18.2 x 10.6 cm.*

*Portrait of Fath Ali Shah, signed by Mir Ali. Tehran, dated 1230 AH/1814 AD. Oil on canvas. 224 x 103 cm.*



