

LA Times, Nov. 5, 92

ART REVIEW

A 'Persian'
Perspective
at LACMABy WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

Iran, these days, is not the Western world's favorite country. But present enmity is little more than a momentary mood in the history of a place where cultural memory stretches back 3,000 years. Located on a rich, ancient trade route attractive to human predators, Iran remembers when it was expanded into the Persian empire by Cyrus the Great in 550 BC, overcome by Alexander the Great in 333 BC, vanquished by Muslim Arabs in 637, and overrun by the brutal Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan who took power in 1267.

That is where the thread of time is plucked up and carried to the 19th Century in the County Museum of Art's latest exhibition, "Art of the Persian Courts," opening today. Organized by LACMA, it consists of some 125 works drawn mainly from the exquisite, sumptuous illustrated books that were the central expressive vehicle for Persian art. The form was preferred for centuries because, although Persian rulers built sumptuous palaces they were often on military campaign living in tents. Small, elaborate books fed their spiritual, literary and artistic longings.



Los Angeles County Museum of Art

An illuminated sheet from the Book of Kings is in LACMA show.

The present exhibition comes from the Art and History Trust, Liechtenstein, a trove put together over the past 20 years by

collector A. Soudevar to further understanding of the richness of Persian culture. LACMA curator
Please see 'PERSIAN,' F3

PERSIAN'

Continued from F1

Thomas Kren, specialist in the field, says it is the finest and likely the last thing of its kind in private hands.

Viewers inclined to find all that a bit remote, specialized and scholarly will be pleasantly startled to find their optical nerves luxuriously tickled by illuminated sheets from ancient texts like the traditional epic the *Shahnama*—the Book of Kings. Pages drawn from a giant Koran that belonged to Tamerlane are so large they can be deciphered from the top of the Ahmanson Gallery atrium—if, of course you read Arabic.

Most works are tiny. "Persian" is virtually synonymous with "miniature." Words are rendered in papier-like calligraphy, borders look like kaleidoscopic cloisonné. Images are sweet, stylized and vaguely immature, like the work of a strangely sophisticated child living out a princeling's fantasy.

Royal personages depicted are always ferociously handsome with cascading black beards, broad shoulders and tiny waists. It's downright weird to see a 19th-Century portrait of Fath-Ali Shah done in a near life-size European format—one of the only giant miniatures in existence. For all its dignified macho, the subject matter is remarkably chaste. There are dragons, murders, miracles, hunts and banquets but no image of romantic dalliance turns up until a late, rather surreal "Two Lovers." It is so rare as to be thought unique.

Persian style pops up in modern Western imagery with some regularity. In the '50s, the Scandinavian designer Bjorn Windblad used it to project an aura of innocent and decorative theatricality. More recently, the Italian Francesco Clemente employed elements of the Persian to perverse effect.

If all that sounds excessively aesthetic to some viewers, the fat,

informative, copiously illustrated 400-plus page catalogue links art back to history's endless paradox.

Today, Iran's ayatollahs appear obdurately rigid in rejection of outside influence. Historically, Persian culture was the opposite. Dynastic invasion didn't stop with Genghis Khan. New rulers invariably adopted prestigious Persian traditions and language to gain legitimacy. Persia had cultural clout, as France did in the Euro-American sphere.

Usurping rulers pretended to be dedicated followers of the dictates of the Koran, which forbids graven imagery and the drinking of alcohol. In the privacy of their royal quarters, the ruling entourage enjoyed their illustrated books and regarded a fine wine cup as the ultimate symbol of kingship. There is a prime example in agate on view. It belonged to the last of the rulers in Tamerlane's dynasty. An accompanying poem celebrates red wine as "molten rubies."

Persian culture accepted rather than resisted foreign concepts, weaving Chinese, Turkish, Indian and finally European ideas into the pattern of Persian thought and art. The result is a style that maintained remarkable internal consistency for nearly 700 years while absorbing new elements. From the Mongol period, we find a royal decree written in Persianized Arab script, half in Turkish, half in Persian and affixed with a Chinese seal.

Rather rugged illuminations give faces Oriental eyes but the overriding style is pure Persian, flattening and patterning form.

In the 14th Century, the Turkic warlord Tamerlane took over. His dynasty brought the illustrated book to apogee. The simplified, vigorous, childlike style of the period shows Turks trying to fit themselves into the aristocratic Persian tradition.

The fervid Shiite Safavids produced an encrusted, courtly art of

great elaboration—a lot of royal glitter and flash. There is so much color and pattern in this art it sometimes seems its makers were not concerned with drawing. A beautifully rendered "Caricature of Obeydollah Khan" gives the lie to that notion.

Mughal India seemed to soften the style, lending it a lyric grace as seen in a portrait of Shah Soja as a child holding a flower.

There are many angles from which to slice a historic pie as dense as this exhibition. This art can literally be regarded as a political tool acting as propaganda for succeeding generations of absolute rulers. It can be seen psychologically as a means by which essentially illegitimate upstart strongmen reassured themselves they were the wise, strong, righteous leaders they pretended to be.

Or it can be viewed as art

intrinsicly done for its own sake, as all art that endures must be. Toward the end of the exhibition the influence of European art begins to be felt. Some results border on pure kitsch, like a ceremonial portrait of the late puppet Bahador Shah enthroned. Others have a mystical gentleness, like "Majnun Visited by His Father." It looks like a transliterated version of the Magi visiting Bethlehem mixed with Edward Hicks' "Peaceable Kingdom."

Persia was not peaceable but the longing for it shows everywhere in its art.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., to Jan. 24., (213) 857-6000, closed Mondays.