THE EVERLASTING FLAME
Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination

Edited by
Sarah Stewart, Ursula Sims-Williams, Firoza Punthakey Mistree
Published on the occasion of the exhibition
The Everlasting Flame:
Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination
National Museum, Delhi

Curated by
Sarah Stewart • Firoza Punthakey Mistree
Ursula Sims-Williams • Almut Hintze • Pheroza J. Godrej
Shernaz Cama

Exhibition designed by
Morris Associates
assisted by Soku Designs
Supplement Content

3 The Silk Road, Central Asia and China 18
4 Judaeo-Christian world 32
5 Imperial Iran 34
6 Post Arab Conquest 50
7 Journey and Settlement 56
8 Parsi Salon 66
The Ministry of Minority Affairs as an organisation is committed to providing support and empowering the minority communities and creating an environment for strengthening the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious character of our nation.

In 2014, UNESCO Parzor introduced the idea for organising the exhibition, The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination in India. This initiative was then taken up by the Ministry and all support has been provided to make this a successful project in India as we recognise the need to inform people about the history and culture of our Parsi community.

The Parsis have been an integral part of India and have contributed immensely to society over the past 1200 years. Unfortunately, over the years this community has substantially reduced in number which has been a major cause for concern for the Government of India. This exhibition on the history of the Zoroastrians is a crucial initiative for India and was organised under the Hamari Dharohar Programme of the Ministry of Minority Affairs.

The Everlasting Flame International Programme has been manifested in three exhibitions at National Museum, National Gallery of Modern Art and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts around this theme. I am grateful to all the institutions and individuals who have lent their objects from across the world to be showcased in these exhibitions and enabled us to share the history of the Zoroastrians through objects from all over the world.

I would like thank the Government of India and the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Finance in particular for giving all their support and enthusiasm to this project.

I hope this exhibition creates awareness among our citizens and others about the significant history of the Parsi community among us and encourages people to support the growth and culture of this community.

Originated more than 3000 years ago, Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions of the World and much like the ancient Vedic culture, it was an oral religion transferred from generation to generation through priests. There have also been close similarities between Sanskrit and ancient Avestan language which are both known to be one of the oldest languages of the world. In many ways, there has been a deep connection between ancient India and ancient Iran and it is not surprising that we cherish and celebrate it till date.

When the Ministry of Minority Affairs decided to sponsor this Exhibition through their scheme Hamari Dharohar, I was pleased to extend all possible help through the Institutions under the Ministry of Culture so that it could be a rich and long standing partnership for the overall benefit of the people of India and world heritage where India features prominently.

Originated in ancient Iran, a large number of Zoroastrian people travelled to India in medieval times and landed in present day Gujarat which became the core of the Parsi Community here. The contributions of the Parsis in India is well known, from the arts to sciences and literature and most of all in philanthropy, the Parsi Community has contributed a great deal to Indian people. I believe, through this important exhibition, we are also celebrating these contributions. By supporting such programmes we are not only bringing increased awareness and appreciation for lesser known cultures but also highlighting that people have always been related across continents and civilizations have developed in conversation with each other.

I would like to thank Dr. Najma Heptullah, Hon’ble Minister of Minority Affairs for supporting this project enthusiastically. It is symbolic of her deep commitment to the cause of minorities in India. In a country like India which is known for its plurality, we are proud to celebrate another ancient wisdom which arrived in our country many centuries ago and continues to enrich our knowledge systems.
In 2015, the Government of India announced that it will be supporting The Everlasting Flame International Programme to showcase the contributions of the Zoroastrians to world culture and history. The Everlasting Flame International Programme has been manifested in three exhibitions at National Museum, National Gallery of Modern Art and the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts around this theme. These Exhibitions have been supported by the Ministry of Minority Affairs under their scheme Hamari Dharohar.

The Exhibition at National Museum titled The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination was first organized at SOAS, University of London, in 2013. It presents viewers with a visual narrative of the history of Zoroastrianism from its ancient Iranian roots to its emergence as the foremost religion of the Achaemenid and Parthian empires and its consolidation as the state religion under Sasanians. The exhibition also brings forth the influence of Zoroastrianism in Central Asia, China and other regions.

The theme of this exhibition is of particular interest in India as we have Parsi communities among us and sharing their history through objects from all over the world is significant. The Exhibition is unique and a first of its kind with over 42 lenders including the British Library, British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, The Wellcome Trust, the John Rylands Library, Ancient India and Iran Trust, The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe and the Warburg Institute in the UK; The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg and the National Museum of Iran, Tehran, many of whom are lending to India for the first time. Members of the Parsi Community in India and abroad have generously come forward and lent objects to the Exhibition which truly marks their support for the initiative. I would like to thank SOAS, University of London, Parzor Foundation, the British Library and the National Museum of Iran in particular for their immense support and cooperation towards this exhibition as collaborators. I would also like to compliment the hard work put in by the National Museum team, CPWD, Colin Morris Associates and Saurabh Sharma of SOKU Designs without whom this project would not have culminated so wonderfully.

The support from the Ministry of Minority Affairs and Ministry of Culture was invaluable in order to put together this large scale project. I wish to thank the Secretary, Minority Affairs, Shri Rakesh Garg, Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Shri Narendra Kumar Sinha, Joint Secretary, Minority Affairs, Shri Anurag Bajpai and Mr. Shahbaz Ali, CMD, National Minorities Fund Development Corporation (NMFDC) and his team of managers for their constant support in realizing the project.

I hope this exhibition and the supplementary catalogue enrich the visitor’s experience and assist them to obtain a deeper understanding of the history and traditions of the Zoroastrians.

Sanjiv Mittal
Director General, National Museum

Baroness Valerie Amos
Director, SOAS

The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in history and imagination is the first SOAS University of London exhibition to be taken on tour. It will be hosted at the National Museum in Delhi, one of India’s largest museums.

The School received its Royal Charter as a College of the University of London in June 1916 and this event marks our first centenary event.

The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in history and imagination is organised in collaboration with the British Library and UNESCO Parzor. The exhibition will display objects from the British Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, State Hermitage Museum, Alpaiwalla Museum, Mumbai, Institute of Archaeology and Aفارсятб Museum, Samarkand as well as loans from the British Library, other libraries and private collections.

Visitors to the exhibition will be introduced to a fascinating and diverse collection of artefacts, texts, paintings and textiles. These will be displayed alongside a number of unique installations that include a walk in fire temple.

The exhibition was first shown at SOAS’ Brunei Gallery in 2013 in London to widespread acclaim. The interest shown in the exhibition demonstrated a desire for information and knowledge about Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest living faiths and one of Iran’s great contributions to the history of human thought, has been studied at SOAS since 1929. A lectureship was established in Ancient Iranian Studies, through annual Parsi benefactions, as early as the 1930s. Harold Walter Bailey held the Parsee Community’s lectureship and Walter Bruno Henning succeeded him; both were leading scholars in Iranian Studies.

However it was the late Professor Mary Boyce who put the university on the world map of Zoroastrian Studies. She taught and carried out research at SOAS from 1947 until 1982, and made an extraordinary impact on the School and on her subject. Since then, SOAS has had many distinguished scholars of Zoroastrianism and Iranian Studies.

We are grateful to all those who have contributed to the mounting of our exhibition in Delhi, which has been facilitated by the generous support of the Government of India through the Ministry of Minority Affairs (MOMA). In particular I would like to thank the Director and team at the National Museum, the Director and team of UNESCO Parzor, the institutions and private lenders who have provided the rich content of the exhibition, the curators and advisors, and all those at SOAS who have assisted in the successful staging of the exhibition.
It gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to be able to write this short prefatory note for the supplementary catalogue to ‘Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in history and imagination’ at the National Museum of India, Delhi. This is a project with which we at the British Library have been closely involved since the exhibition was first planned in London in 2012. Not only does its opening in Delhi celebrate our special relationship with the School of Oriental and African Studies in their Centenary year, but it marks what we hope will be a continued relationship with partner institutions in India on a range of projects that advance knowledge and mutual understanding.

The British Library is proud to have co-curated this exhibition under a SOAS flag in collaboration with partner institutions, and to have contributed a significant number of key loans, this being the first time it has ever loaned material to an Indian institution. In addition to the world’s oldest Zoroastrian prayer dating from the 9th century CE, and other important Zoroastrian sacred texts, we are pleased to have lent two rare 15th century European illustrated manuscripts which demonstrate the influence of Zoroastrianism and its visual interpretation in the West. Other important British Library exhibits include a fifth or sixth century Syriac manuscript and a Zoroastrian prayer book, the first non-official publication to be have been printed in India in a vernacular language.

The exhibition includes over 300 objects ranging from antiquity to the present day originating from an area stretching from Europe to India, Central Asia, and China. The diversity of the Zoroastrian faith truly reflects the multi-cultural nature of the society in which we live today.

UNESCO Parzor is delighted that the world, in particular, the Government of India, realizing the demographic predicament of the Parsi Zoroastrians of India, has understood the threat to an ancient heritage and culture. All countries who are signatories to UNESCO should protect such a community in the fields of Tangible and Intangible Heritage.

We are grateful that the Government of India has fully supported the International Everlasting Flame Programme 2016. India has given shelter to the Zoroastrian faith for over 1200 years. Founded by the Bronze Age Prophet Zarathushtra of Iran, Zoroastrianism is the world’s oldest revealed religion. Today the Parsi Zoroastrians are a distinct thread in the tapestry of India.

Across the world, the preservation of ethnicity, language, distinct dress and lifestyles is a challenge in a globalizing world. Yet it is necessary to bind the past with living practices, as done in the Exhibition "Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination." This seminal exhibition brings together Institutions and individuals from all parts of the world combining academic scholarships as well as living history. Thus, it brings alive a complete picture of an ancient civilization and its modern people.

The Government of India deserves great credit for its support to this "micro-minority," culture under the Hamari Dharohar Programme of the Ministry of Minority Affairs. The International Everlasting Flame Programme 2016, is one more commitment of the Government through this Ministry, as well as the Ministry of Culture. Here the importance of Zoroastrianism to humanity will come alive in the National Capital, with SOAS, University of London bringing the treasures of the British Museum, the British Library, National Museum, Tehran and Institutions from across the world, to display Zoroastrian culture.

At this Programme, several countries and scholars from across the world will also gather to discuss a heritage of great value to humanity in a Conference Zoroastrianism in the New Millennium, at the National Museum Institute. Today with a world that is rapidly homogenizing, identity struggles are often problematic. The Parsi example of ‘Sugar in the Milk’ is one that the world needs to study and appreciate our land India, for its care of this tiny group of refugees.

Mr. Sanjiv Mittal, Ms. Joyoti Roy, Mr. Kamlesh Sharma, Ms. Ruchira Verma and all those at the National Museum, must be congratulated for their dedication to excellence. I wish the Programme all success.

Roly Keating
Chief Executive, British Library

Dr. Shernaz Cama
Director, UNESCO Parzor
The announcement by the Minister of Finance, Government of India, in the budget speech of March 2014 to sponsor the Everlasting Flame Programme delighted many Parsis who were listening at the time. For all those involved in the original exhibition, held in the Brunei Gallery in 2013, their effort was rewarded with a chance to take the exhibition on tour – the first time a SOAS exhibition has left the confines of the University of London. For those who supported the exhibition in 2013 their generosity was rewarded by the creation of a visual narrative that people elsewhere in the world wished to see.

Taking the exhibition to India has given the curators the opportunity to expand the collection to include new objects, paintings and textiles that have been described in a Supplement to the existing Catalogue, published by the National Museum. The additional material includes some original wall paintings from Penjakent, introduced by Frantz Grenet, courtesy of the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg. These are drawn from several of the Rostam cycles depicting the great Persian hero in combat either with demons or warriors. Pavel Livjue describes the site of Penjakent and its history. Rostam and his horse Rakhsh also feature in the earliest written version of the Rostam Cycle, a Sogdian fragment from Dunhuang, China, dating from the ninth century CE.

Rostam in battle and having his wounds tended to by the mythical bird, simorgh, is also the subject of two illustrated folios from a copy of the Shahnnameh in the National Museum, Delhi. These have been selected and researched by Khatibur Rahman. Different manifestations of the simorgh (Pahl. senmurv) occur throughout the exhibition (Catalogue 89, 109, 110, 116. Supplement 13, 15, 19, 23, 34). We are pleased this time to include textile fragments from the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, that depict the simunvar in decorative pearl roundels. These are discussed by Jenny Rose in her piece: Beasts, Real and Imagined.

One of the more beautiful acquisitions for this exhibition is the enamelled reliquary casket from Limoges. The casket portrays the biblical Wise Men who made the journey to Bethlehem to worship the Christ child. Formerly displayed in the exhibition Wise Men from the East, Zoroastrian Traditions in Persia and Beyond (British Museum, 2014). Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis and Almut Hintze discuss the biblical account and its Iranian connections.

The exhibition has been greatly enhanced by loans from the National Museum of Iran, Tehran. The Sasanian silver dishes, in particular, complement those that have been lent by the State Hermitage Museum. Prudence Harper introduces this collection – most of which is from the Sasanian period.

Some additional and important manuscripts have been loaned from the British Library. These acquisitions elaborate on some of the themes of the exhibition and have been researched by Ursula Sims-Williams. They include an imperial copy of the Shahnnameh illustrated around 1613 in the studio of the Mughal statesman Khankhanan Abb al-Rahim. She also introduces the coins from the Mughal period of which the gold mohurs of Emperor Akbar are particularly significant insofar as they show the Zoroastrian month names. Ursula Sims-Williams and Firoza Punthakey Mistree discuss the supposed encounter between the Zoroastrian priest, Meherjirana, and the Emperor at the court of Akbar. The Dasatur-i asmani sheds light on religious beliefs current during the reign of the Emperor Akbar through the eyes of the spiritual leader Azar Kayvan.

Firoza Punthakey Mistree gives an account of the connection between the Parsi artist Pestonjee Romanjee, and the author Rudyard Kipling, through Kipling’s Just So Stories for Little Children. She has also contributed many captions on the new paintings, textiles and furniture from Mumbai that we are pleased to be able to display in the Delhi exhibition. Some exquisite garas have been added to the exhibition in Delhi. Shernaz Cama introduces these in her piece on Parsi textiles and embroidery.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous sponsorship of the Ministry of Minority Affairs (MOMA), Government of India. We are grateful to the National Museum and Director General, Sanjiv Mittal, for hosting the exhibition. Also for the time and effort devoted to the project by the Museum’s dedicated Outreach team: Joyoti Roy, Ruchira Verma, Vasundhara Sangwan, Rige Shiba and K.K Sharma (Exhibitions). Joyoti Roy especially should be warmly thanked for her role in liaising between London and Delhi over many months to make this a truly collaborative event.

There are many at SOAS who have contributed to the success of the exhibition. In particular I would like to thank our Director, Valerie Amos, School Secretary Chris Ince, John Hollingsworth, Galleries Manager, and Jahan Foster, Exhibition Assistant. We also thank Colin Morris and his team at CMA, our exhibition designers, who have worked in collaboration with the National Museum team and Soku Designs. We are grateful to Anjan Dey for the design and layout of the catalogue.

I would like to thank my co-curators Firoza Punthakey Mistree, Ursula Sims-Williams, Almut Hintze, Pheroza Godrej and Shernaz Cama for all their help and expertise. Ursula and Firoza have given generously of their time to ensure the successful production of the Supplementary Catalogue and the installation of the exhibition in the National Museum. I am also grateful to the Advisors to the exhibition, Frantz Grenet, Philip Kreyenbroek, Alan Williams, Jenny Rose and especially Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis, who has helped to source the objects from the National Museum of Iran, Tehran. Thanks are due to the Bombay Parsi Panchayet for the restoration work undertaken on the new loans of paintings, particularly those from the Bhabha Sanatorium in Bandra.

Our gratitude to the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe and the Aequa Foundation for providing the core funding for the 2013 exhibition in London, as well as the Catalogue, should also be recorded here. We are grateful to Dr Cyrus Poonawala for sponsoring the construction of the fire temple and the Persepolis glass installation. Both were created especially for the London exhibition and will be shown again in Delhi.

We learned recently and with great sadness that our former Director and Principal of SOAS, Professor Paul Webley, passed away on 3rd March. Professor Webley supported the Everlasting Flame project from its inception, and its continuation is in large part due to his advice and support. He was delighted to learn that the exhibition would travel to Delhi.
The Sogdian civilization, which flourished between the 5th and the 8th centuries CE, covered most of the territories of present-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, including the Sogdian colonies along the Silk Road. This civilization and especially its Zoroastrian component are mainly illustrated, on the one hand, by its funerary art (ossuaries, decorated sarcophagi and the funerary couches of Sogdian merchants in Northern China), and on the other hand by mural paintings found at the major sites of Samarkand, Panjikent, Varakhdzha near Bukhara, and Shahristan in Ustrushana. Although many Sogdians in China did in fact convert to Buddhism, it was persecuted at times in Sogdiana itself, e.g. at Samarkand in the period of Xuanzang’s visit, and its art is rarely represented there. Eastern Christianity and Manichaeism were better tolerated, but so far no Christian or Manichaean paintings have been identified in Sogdiana itself (except for one possible case at Panjikent).

The site of Panjikent, a middle-size independent city 60 km to the east of Samarkand, has been intensively excavated since 1947 by an expedition from the Hermitage Museum and has provided by far the main collection of Sogdian paintings, found in the two city temples as well as in richly decorated private houses. 1

The subjects safely identified in Temple I seem to refer rather to ‘canonical’ Zoroastrianism (the fire altar, the goddess Druwasp, the Fravardegan and Abrezagan festivals), while the divine images in Temple II belong to the cult of the syncretic goddess Nana (of ultimate Mesopotamian origin), and to her associate Weshparkar (the Iranian god Vayu depicted in the guise of the Indian god Shiva). In the reception rooms of the private houses, the wall facing the entrance is occupied by the image of the deity, or divine couple that the family considered to be its protector. These deities, including Weshparkar and Nana, belong to the Zoroastrian pantheon with a strong Indian influence in their iconography.

The identity of some of them (i.e. the very popular couple of the ‘god with a camel’ and ‘goddess with a ram’) is still disputed. The side walls illustrate stories from the epics, with a band of self-contained panels illustrating fables at the bottom. The epic repertoire is suffused with Zoroastrian references for example the Fravahars (guardian spirits) flying over a battle scene, various flying creatures symbolizing the Farr (divine glory) bringing fortune to heroes, and battles against demons, etc. The only subjects so far identified in Iranian literature belong to the cycle of Rostam: his heroic deeds against the demons of Mazandaran (See Supplement 1 and 2 below) and, according to a recent proposal, 2 the episode of his son Faramarz freeing an Indian princess who had been captured by a three-headed demon (Supplement 3).
2. A Sogdian fragment from the Rostam Cycle
Facsimile reproduction of British Library Or.8212/81 (Ch.00349) discovered at Dunhuang, China, 9th century CE

This Sogdian fragment is almost certainly by the same scribe as the Ashem Vohu fragment (Catalogue 27). It describes how the hero Rostam and his horse Rakhsh together destroy a band of demons by pretending to flee and then attacking them while they were unprepared. This episode does not occur in the Persian epic the Shahnameh, but may correspond to one of the scenes depicted in the Rostam cycle from Panjikent in Sogdiana (Supplement 1 above).

---

Translation

...[The demons] opened the city gates. Many archers, many charioteers, many riding elephants, many riding monkeys, many riding pigs, many riding foxes, many riding dogs, many riding on snakes and on lizards, many on foot, many who went flying like vultures and ... many upside-down, the head downwards and the feet upwards: they all bellowed out a roar, they raised a mighty storm, rain, snow, hail, [lightning] and thunder, they opened their evil mouths and spouted fire, flame and smoke. They departed in search of the valiant Rostam.

Then the observant Rakhsh came and woke Rostam. Rostam arose from his sleep, quickly donned his leopard-skin garment, tied on his bow-case, mounted Rakhsh and hastened towards the demons. When Rostam saw from afar the army of the demons, he said to Rakhsh: Come, sir, run away little by little; let us perform [a trick] so that the demons [pursue us] to the flat [plain ...]. Rakhsh agreed. Immediately Rostam turned back. When the demons saw, at once both the cavalry and the infantry quickly hurled themselves forward. They said to one another: Now the chief’s hope has been crushed, no longer is he prepared to do battle with us. By no means let him escape! Do not kill him either, but take him alive so that we may show him evil punishment and harsh torture! The demons encouraged one another greatly; they all howled and departed in pursuit of Rostam. Then Rostam turned round and attacked the demons like a fierce lion attacking a deer or a hyena attacking a flock or herd, like a falcon attacking a [hare or] a porcupine attacking a snake, and he began [to destroy] them ...

---

21

3. A king enthroned
Panjikent, Tajikistan • c 740 CE • Wall-painting on dry loess plaster • 140 x 114 cm

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, SA-16190

This fragment from a reception hall depicts the final scene of the rescue of a girl kidnapped by a demon. The king is seated cross-legged on a golden throne under an arch. He holds an axe in his right hand and his left hand is pointing towards a kneeling couple, a young champion with the girl he has rescued. The armour of a defeated demon, a trophy, lies near the throne. To the right of the arch stands the hero Rostam in his leopard-skin. Scholars formerly believed that this scene depicted the story of Rostam’s daughter Zar-banu but recent scholarship has attempted to identify the young hero as Faramarz, the son of Rostam. 

---

20
THE AMBASSADORS’ PAINTING AT SAMARKAND

The cycle of the ‘Ambassadors’ Painting’ at Samarkand presents a unique portrayal of the Nowruz (New Year) festival. The painting was discovered in 1965 at Afrasiab, the pre-Mongol site of Samarkand. It decorated the four walls (each 11 metres long) of an aristocratic house. While this was probably not the royal palace, the subject matter of the paintings was clearly inspired by the propaganda of Varkhurban, king of Sogdiana, known to have ruled in the 650’s and early 660’s. As recognized recently⁴, the inspiration for the murals may have been the calendar conjunction which occurred in 660 and 663 as a result of which the summer solstice, the 6th day of Nowruz (the ‘royal’ day) and the ‘Dragon Boats’ festival coincided. This would have allowed King Varkhurban to be portrayed presiding over the reception in an open air ceremony of ambassadors from the neighbouring kingdoms of Sogdiana’s main ally China, and Tibet. Koreans are also included as part of the Chinese delegation.

The southern wall (Supplement 4) shows the procession on the sixth day of Nowruz.

The eastern wall, poorly preserved, shows scenes from India, probably including tales. At the end on the left-hand side two astrologers are discussing in front of an armillary sphere.

The northern wall contains scenes from Chinese court life: the empress taking part in the ‘Dragon Boats’ festival, the emperor presiding over a panther hunt. From right to left we see King Varkhurban (oversized and largely destroyed) with riders, possibly including ambassadors, sacrificial animals (a horse and four geese) brought by figures, possibly priests, wearing the padum (mouth covering); two courtiers riding camels and holding sacrificial clubs; three royal spouses riding side-saddle (the one at the top is missing); an elephant, which probably carried the queen; and the royal mausoleum with various figures standing in front, including a warrior.⁴

From 1908 about 700 fragments of terracotta ossuaries and their covers were found at Biya-Naiman, near Kata-Kurgan on the way from Bukhara to Samarkand. They were discovered by N.B. Katašsky (1868-1943), a military engineer resident in Samarkand, an amateur and local historian and a well-known collector of antiquities. The ossuary was originally decorated on four sides by a repeated motif of the six Amesha Spentas, there are no existing fragments of ossuaries where the two last figures were depicted together with the four other ones, and so the reconstruction remains disputable.⁶

The southern wall of the ‘Ambassadors’ Painting from Samarkand shows the procession on the sixth day of Nowruz (New Year) when the king and his retinue processed to the mausoleum of his parents situated to the East of the city walls. This ritual is described in Chinese records on the Chach (Tashkent) kingdom and is also briefly mentioned in connection with Samarkand.

— not, however, possible at this period. Indeed many Turkish guards are seen attending the ceremony, but their presence can be explained by their military importance in all Sogdian principalities. The identified ambassadors come from the neighbouring kingdoms of Sogdiana’s main ally China, and Tibet. Koreans are also included as part of the Chinese delegation.

The southern wall (Supplement 4) shows the procession on the sixth day of Nowruz. The eastern wall, poorly preserved, shows scenes from India, probably including tales. At the end on the left-hand side two astrologers are discussing in front of an armillary sphere.

The northern wall contains scenes from Chinese court life: the empress taking part in the ‘Dragon Boats’ festival, the emperor presiding over a panther hunt. From right to left we see King Varkhurban (oversized and largely destroyed) with riders, possibly including ambassadors, sacrificial animals (a horse and four geese) brought by figures, possibly priests, wearing the padum (mouth covering); two courtiers riding camels and holding sacrificial clubs; three royal spouses riding side-saddle (the one at the top is missing); an elephant, which probably carried the queen; and the royal mausoleum with various figures standing in front, including a warrior.⁴

The eastern wall, poorly preserved, shows scenes from India, probably including tales. At the end on the left-hand side two astrologers are discussing in front of an armillary sphere.

The northern wall contains scenes from Chinese court life: the empress taking part in the ‘Dragon Boats’ festival, the emperor presiding over a panther hunt. From right to left we see King Varkhurban (oversized and largely destroyed) with riders, possibly including ambassadors, sacrificial animals (a horse and four geese) brought by figures, possibly priests, wearing the padum (mouth covering); two courtiers riding camels and holding sacrificial clubs; three royal spouses riding side-saddle (the one at the top is missing); an elephant, which probably carried the queen; and the royal mausoleum with various figures standing in front, including a warrior.⁴

5 a-f. Biya-Naiman ossuary fragments.

Biya-Naiman, Uzbekistan • 7th century • Baked clay • 27 x 27 cm (5a) Catalogue 38; 13.5 x 13 cm (5b) Catalogue 40; 19.5 x 22 cm (5c) Catalogue 39; 20 x 15.5 cm (5d); 19.5 x 15 cm (5e); 29 x 23 cm (5f).

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, CA-2822 (5b) Catalogue 226; CA-2765 (5c) Catalogue 39; CA-2976; CA-2977; CA-2918 (5a) Catalogue 38; 13.5 x 13 cm (5b) Catalogue 40; 19.5 x 22 cm (5c) Catalogue 39; 20 x 15.5 cm (5d); 19.5 x 15 cm (5e); 29 x 23 cm (5f).

5 a-f. Biya-Naiman ossuary fragments.

Biya-Naiman, Uzbekistan • 7th century • Baked clay • 27 x 27 cm (5a) Catalogue 38; 13.5 x 13 cm (5b) Catalogue 40; 19.5 x 22 cm (5c) Catalogue 39; 20 x 15.5 cm (5d); 19.5 x 15 cm (5e); 29 x 23 cm (5f).

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, CA-2822 (5b) Catalogue 226; CA-2765 (5c) Catalogue 39; CA-2976; CA-2977; CA-2918 (5a) Catalogue 38; 13.5 x 13 cm (5b) Catalogue 40; 19.5 x 22 cm (5c) Catalogue 39; 20 x 15.5 cm (5d); 19.5 x 15 cm (5e); 29 x 23 cm (5f).

The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, CA-2822 (5b) Catalogue 226; CA-2765 (5c) Catalogue 39; CA-2976; CA-2977; CA-2918 (5a) Catalogue 38; 13.5 x 13 cm (5b) Catalogue 40; 19.5 x 22 cm (5c) Catalogue 39; 20 x 15.5 cm (5d); 19.5 x 15 cm (5e); 29 x 23 cm (5f).
THE EXCAVATION OF PANJIKENT

The site of Panjikent (early medieval Panchkath) is located near the modern town of the same name in Tajikistan. The ruins represent the easternmost town of Sogdiana, its capital Samarkand being 60 km to the west. Owing to the preservation of the archaeological site and 70 years continuous work by archaeologists from St. Petersburg and Tajikistan, it has become the best known early medieval monument in Central Asia. The city prospered between the 5th and 8th centuries CE. In 722 it was conquered by the Arabs but revived again before being abandoned in the 760s. The moderately sized city, with a population of not more than 10,000, consisted of a walled inner town, a citadel with a palace, surrounded by village houses and a necropolis to the south. The latter comprised elevated vaults (nauses) in which ossuaries were placed. At the centre of the city were two temples, identical in form and development, located next to one another. The temple area consisted of a cela with a monumental portal in the west, a huge yard surrounded by secondary chapels and porticoes. For a short period one of the temples included a secondary fire-sanctuary. The temples, palaces and many private houses had decorated reception areas. They were adorned with the wooden carved ceilings and wall paintings, which have made ancient Panjikent so famous.

The wall paintings from Panjikent have been preserved through the efforts and expertise of restorers who established a unique method for removing and preserving this fragile material. Their skills in conservation and their understanding of this unique example of medieval art were developed during 70 years of excavation, together with new archaeological and documentary methods. During the first seven years excavations were undertaken by Alexander Yu. Yakubovsky, who was succeeded by Mikhail M. Diakonoff in 1954 and then by Alexander M. Belenitsky, and later Boris I. Marshak until his death in 2006. All of them made exceptional contributions to the understanding of the site. The present author has directed excavations since 2010; every year we encounter new, and often astonishing examples of wall painting.
BEASTS, REAL AND IMAGINED

At the Ancient Persian palace complex of Persepolis, lions (or leonine-like creatures), bulls, and griffins appear in various contexts (Catalogue 63, 64, 67, 72, 73), including the double-headed stone capitals atop the tall columns of the Apadana. Griffins also appear on the Apadana tribute relief: Armenian envoys carry a tall, beak-spouted vessel, with a griffin on each of the two handles and the Lydian delegation bears an armlet with a griffin at each end. The Oxus treasure contained gold examples of such an armlet, depicting elaborate horned griffins, with their paws extended, as on the stone capitals of Persepolis, and with unfurled wings.

Such animal protomes also formed the forepart of rhytons found in both Achaemenid and Parthian-era locations. One variation of rhyton depicted the animal with wings, including lions (Catalogue 178). Such real or hybrid animals seem to have been perceived as symbols of royal power - a connection that reflects Near Eastern concepts. This association, along with the iconography, endures into the Sasanian period and beyond.

It has been suggested that the inspiration for the hybrid dog-headed, dog-pawed, winged, and feather-tailed animal, which is commonly identified as the *semnûrv*, may be found in some of these Achaemenid precursors. This polymorphous *semnûrv* first appears in a late 5th - or early 6th - century mural in Temple II at Panjikent, and is then found, with subtle variations, in late Sasanian, early Islamic and even Byzantine iconography: sometimes the front legs are leonine, and the tail may be like a peacock's, or scaled like a fish (Catalogue 87, 88, 89). The image is replicated as a motif on the caftan of one of the eastern Iranian delegations depicted in the 7th century mural on the western wall of the palace at Ahradish, and on textiles from Central Asia (Supplement 13).

One of the Avestan hymns describes the ‘great bird Saena’ (Yi. 14.41), and it is from the compound term ‘Saena meregha’ (Saena bird) that the Middle Persian *semnûrv* and the Persian *simorgh* both derive. The Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts Bundahishn and Vizidagiha i Zadspram both contain passages that draw parallels between the *semnûrv* and the bat. This may be because of the composite mammal-bird nature of each animal: the one real, the other mythical. In both Zoroastrian texts and in Ferdowsi’s New Persian *Shahnameh*, which re-tells Iranian national history up to the end of the Sasanian period, the *semnûrv* is always a bird. Post-Mongol versions of the *Shahnameh* often represent the *semnûrv/simorgh* with aspects that reflect Chinese dragon or phoenix imagery (Catalogue 113).

---

12 • Panel, carved bone, from a casket depicting a griffin
Byzantine or Italy • 11th century • Carved bone • 6.2 x 4.8 (horizontal) 4.7 cm (top)
Victoria and Albert Museum, A.74-1925

The panel depicts a seated bird-like creature, with two paws and a slender animal’s head, its feathered tail and wings standing erect. There are remains of gilding on the tail and wings. There are several holes pierced in the plain border and ground, one of which contains an ivory pin. The plaque was originally part of a casket which was decorated with mythical and real creatures.
This silk fragment was found in the reliquary of the head of St Helena in the church of St Leu in Paris. The pearled circles and crescent roundels are seen as symbols related to Sasanian royal imagery. Common mythical beasts in Sasanian mythology included winged horses and lions, but the most prominent was the *senmurv*, part bird/part beast, originating from both ancient Babylonian and Assyrian cultures and the sea-horse of Greek art. With the conquest of Iran by the Arabs, the designs of Sasanian workshops were included in their own silk weavings. At this time Greek art had already been incorporated into relics from the Sasanian dynasty, and more particularly Islamic textile arts.

This silk textile belongs to a group of Central Asian textiles previously referred to as ’Zandaniji’. Similar textiles have been found in Western European cathedrals from the medieval period, and in the east. These textiles illustrate the breadth of the silk trade and the extent to which they were valued in East and West. Unlike other textiles this one incorporates design influenced by Sasanian art.

This silk fragment, showing the *senmurv* enclosed in a roundel of pearls, was found in the tomb of a bishop in Verdun Cathedral, France. It is possible that complete fragments were taken, pieced together then sold as a more complete item. The scope of the trade route between China and the Mediterranean, and the flourishing of relations with foreign powers, impacted upon the stylistic development of Sasanian art. The discovery of this fragment and the existence of imported silks in European churches and tombs, illustrates the extent to which patterned silks were both desired by European rulers and valued for religious uses, such as wrapping relics.
Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold there came magi from the east to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him”.

This is how the Gospel of Matthew, dating to the late 1st century CE, introduces the account of the visit of the Wise Men. The word magi used by Matthew to refer to them is an Iranian technical term for a Zoroastrian priest. The word is found both in the Avesta, the sacred texts of the Zoroastrians and in the great rock-cut Old Persian inscription of Darius the Great at Bishapur in western Iran. After the Persian king defeated the rebel Gaumata in 520 BCE, he described him in the inscription as a magush. It also occurs on clay tablets from Persepolis, dating from the years 509–494 BCE. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus mentions magi when describing the ancient Persian historian Herodotus mentions-magi when describing the ancient Persians in the middle of the 5th century BCE, and a century later the Greek author Xenophon refers to Persian magi as authorities in all religious matters.

Matthew wrote his Gospel in Antioch, a city known as a centre where Zoroastrian traders and travellers formed a community. The memory of the Iranian provenance of the Magi lives on in Christian art where they are usually dressed in the elaborate Parthian costume of belted tunic or jacket, trousers with a vertical decorated central strip and a cloak. A soft hat covers the head. It is also fascinating to observe how some portrayals of the nativity scene show the hand(s) of the first magus covered as a sign of respect and piety, also found on the ancient Persian tomb reliefs of Naqsh-i Rostam near Persepolis to Sasanian rock-reliefs of the 3rd century CE and up to 19th-early 20th century Qajar art. In Zoroastrianism, the covering of the hands is also common in religious ceremonies. Matthew’s account does not refer to the number of magi, but he does mention three gifts which they offer to the new-born Christ: gold, myrrh and frankincense. From this the later tradition derived that there were three magi.

The Iranian connection of the magi also lives on in the name Caspar/Gaspar/Jaspar, one of the three Wise Men in the Christian tradition. The name derives from Iranian Gondophares/Vindafarnah meaning ‘he who is finding glory’ and was used by a series of local rulers of the Indo-Parthian Kingdom in the region of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and northwestern India during and just before the 1st century CE. Eastern Iran is the land in which the eschatological events of the Zoroastrian religion are located and where the religion was thought to have been particularly strong. In particular, the future saviour, or Saoshyant, is predicted in the Avesta to emerge from Lake Hamun in Sistan in order to defeat Evil and resurrect the dead.

Persian and Zoroastrian imagery has often been used to portray the biblical Wise Men or Three Kings, who came from the East. In the top register, they are shown on horseback following the first king who is pointing with his right index finger towards the star on his left. The scene below shows them on foot presenting their gifts to the infant Jesus and his mother Mary. The hand of the first king is covered as a sign of respect and piety in the Persian and Zoroastrian tradition. In both scenes they wear Persian tunics and trousers. Geometric decorations cover the back of the casket and the image of a full-length saint decorates the end panels.
ON THE USE OF THE BARSOM IN ZOROASTRIANISM

I long for this barsom with the libation in the Y asna. So ends the first verse of the second of the 72 chapters of the Y asna proper, the central act of priestly worship in Zoroastrianism. In the ceremony, the barsom tays refer to the thin metal rods that are laid across the crescent-shaped stands, mah-ruy, and placed on the ritual table. In earlier times the barsom (Av. baresman) consisted of a bundle of twigs, which were watered by the zot, or ritual priest, during the ritual – a custom that persists to this day despite the change from wood to metal.

The priest invokes the seven divine beings of Ahura Mazda’s creation, Amesha Spentas, early on in the Y asna. Through the doctrine of the Amesha Spentas, the menog, or spiritual world is linked to the getig, or material world by means of the ritual implements used in the ceremony. The barsom represents the plant creation in the ritual, brought into being by Ameretat, the Amesha Spenta associated with Immortality. At the same time priestly ritual is linked to lay devotional life. Therefore, while priests use the plant in the sacred ritual, it is incumbent on all Zoroastrians to nurture plants and trees since they are one of the material creations of Ahura Mazda.

In the Yasts, hymns addressed to the pre-Zoroastian and Zoroastrian divinities of the ancient world, the baresman is associated with the sacrifice. In Yt. 5.98 the divinity Aredvi Sura Anahita is described as one: ‘...round whom stood the Mazda worshippers with baresman in their hands.’ The word baresman here could refer to the grass straw spread beneath the feet of the sacrificial animal, which according to ancient usage also acted as a seat for the divinity who was thought to descend to partake of the sacrifice.

Once Zoroastrianism enters recorded history there are some specific references to the barsom. The Greek author Strabo, writing in the first century BCE, mentions enclosures where magi keep their sacred fires ever-burning and who:

… entering daily, they make their incantations for about an hour, holding before the fire their bundles of rods, and wearing upon their heads high turbans of felt which reach down over their cheeks far enough to cover their lips. This description corresponds with stone carvings of magi from the Sasanian and Arsacid era. It also accords well with Achaemenid depictions such as those on the gold rectangular plaques that belong to the Oxus Treasure. An example is the male figure shown on the gold plaque below (Supplement 17) holding the barsom.

Some five hundred years after the Arab conquest of Iran, the barsom was evidently a ritual that was practiced by Zoroastrians and recognized as such by Muslims. The tenth/eleventh century poet Ferdowsi makes mention of the barsom in his epic the Shahnameh. Following the battle between Khosrow Parviz and Bahram Chubineh the latter flees to the Emperor of China stopping on the way at the house of an old woman to ask for bread and water:

… Yalan-Sineh handed the barsom to Bahram, but he was so sunk in sorrow that he forgot to observe the ritual silence while eating. In another story a miller gives refuge to the last Sasanian King, Yazdegird III, when fleeing from the Arab invaders. The King asks for barsom to hold while saying grace before a meal (reciting the dron Y asht) thus identifying himself as a Zoroastrian, which leads to his death.
SASANIAN SILVER

The history of gilded silver vessels made in the Sasanian Near East begins in the third and early fourth centuries CE with an initially restricted, state-controlled production. The typology of shapes is limited and the themes, narrowly focused, celebrate Iranian rule and kingship, epic and historical. By the fifth century the production has expanded and new shapes appear displaying a greater range of images and themes. How to interpret the new motifs is a challenging question, complicated by the fact that many of the designs closely follow Greco-Roman models. That Zoroastrian rather than Greco-Roman concepts and beliefs governed the selection of images is probable in a society governed by the elite classes for whom the unity of Church and State, of religion and royalty, was an ideal expressed in the double image on coins of an altar superimposed on a throne.

No convincing evidence supports theories that identify certain images on the silver vessels as representations of specific Zoroastrian sacred beings who are portrayed in Sasanian art only on the dynastic rock reliefs and on occasional coins. Nevertheless the Zoroastrian vision of an ordered and stable world and cosmos seems to be reflected in the composition of the designs, and the motifs accord with Zoroastrian beliefs in the richness and fullness of life. The decorated vessels were probably more than luxury objects made of precious metal although the weights inscribed on many of them attest to the importance of their material value. As important must have been their symbolic significance as celebrations of Iranian rule and of the Zoroastrian world view. We can wonder too about the references to khvrsun, the Heavenly Glory and Fortune, occasionally depicted on them in the form of a supernatural creature.

In any consideration of Sasanian silver vessels it is important to distinguish between the central Sasanian realm, with its royal courts and great cities in Iran and Mesopotamia, where the silver described above was produced, and the Sasanian borderlands. The stucco wall decoration found at a fifth century site near Bandian, north of Meshed, attests to the existence in the northeast of a culture in which specific Zoroastrian cult ceremonies, not seen on works made in the central Sasanian lands, were portrayed. Various objects, coins, wall paintings, and clay ossuaries, produced in the Khosian Bactria and Sogd, provide clear evidence that Zoroastrian religious imagery, including the personifications of divine beings, existed in the arts of the Hellenized northeastern lands. The possibility exists, therefore, that silver vessels executed in Sasanian style and technique displaying a more openly Zoroastrian corpus of images may yet be found in border areas in the Hellenized East or in the Roman West.
20 • Dish with a goddess on a panther
Last quarter of the 3rd century CE • Silver • 23 cm
State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. S-74 Nizhne Shakarovka

At the centre of the dish is a relief image of a naked goddess riding a panther or lioness. Behind her is another woman holding a horn. Surrounding the large central medallion are six smaller ones, each containing an animal protome – a bear, horse, zebu, lioness, boar and lion.23 Between the medallions are running warriors, beneath whose feet are acanthus leaves and half-palmettes. As was usual for decorative metalwork, the craftsman used the whole surface, leaving no space between images.

This is one of the earliest known examples of Sasanian metalwork. It includes foreign elements alongside Sasanian motifs. Some of the animal protomes symbolise Zoroastrian deities, while the decorative ornamentation – such as the figures of warriors – clearly reflect western, Roman influences. A goddess on a lion was a widespread subject in art of the Near East.

In technical terms the dish is typical of Sasanian metalwork in which layers were added to achieve a higher relief. It consists of two layers of metal, the upper layer chased with images, while some details such as parts of the warriors’ bodies were made separately and welded on.

On the outside of the dish is a Middle Persian inscription: ‘weight 253 drachmas, property of Pirozan.’

The dish was part of a hoard of several objects found in 1886 in Perm Province. It entered the Imperial Hermitage Museum in 1891 via the Archaeological Commission.

21 • King hunting a lion
Klardasht, Mazandaran • Silver • 28.6 cm
National Museum, Tehran Acc. No. 1275

Allegedly found in Mazandaran this plate displays the image of a princely or royal equestrian hunter shooting lions, considered by Zoroastrians to be a noxious creation of Ahriman but an ancient and prestigious quarry for ruler-hunters in the art of the Near East. The unusual headdress of the hunter is somewhat similar to early headdresses worn by figures whose images are scratched on Persepolis building stones but is unlike any crowns or headdresses worn by early Sasanian kings as they appear on the coins.24 This fact and the odd twisted position of the hunter may support the suggestion that the scene is epic/heroic in nature rather than being a standard Sasanian expression of royal prowess and invincibility, the theme of most central Sasanian hunting plates. Also unusual is the extensive landscape pattern, an image of nature, which may have placed the scene for some viewers in a Zoroastrian paradisiacal environment of mountains and sweet smelling plants.
Found in Iran and dating from around the fourth century BCE, this pouring vessel is in the form of a horse protome which emerges from a lotus and palmette pattern. The horn then expands as it rises to the rim where there is a once-gilded lotus and bud pattern. A spout placed between the bent forelegs which are made of separate pieces of metal, allowed the wine to pass as a stream from the vessel. This type of rhyton was an immensely popular ceremonial and cult vessel in the Greco-Roman West and in the Achaemenid, Seleucid and Parthian Near East. Decorated with various animals (felines, caprids bovines and stags) as well as fantastic creatures, the horn rhyton appears in the arts of the Hellenized world in scenes of banquet and libation. It is, therefore, somewhat surprising that there is so little evidence of the horn rhyton in the following Sasanian period. Perhaps the many cult associations of the vessel discouraged its wider use in a Sasanian Zoroastrian environment where meals were solemn, indeed sacred, occasions and cult activities were rarely portrayed.

In a common theme on Sasanian silver vases and ewers, dancing female figures, sometimes nude and sometimes clothed, are placed within arched frames and hold specific objects: fruit, flowers, animals, children, vessels and cornucopias. The images are related to representations of the Seasons and Months in Greco-Roman art. While the appearance of the scenes on Sasanian silver vessels indicates influences from the art of the Hellenized West, the importance in Zoroastrian Iran of the divinely inspired and constructed calendar with its arrangement of festivals and celebrations in the days and months of the year made it an appropriate theme for the decoration of the court silver vessels. The small musicians and the dancing pose of the ladies on the silver vessels may be explained by the large role of music in Zoroastrian celebrations and concepts of Paradise, the House of Song.
Elaborate water scenes of this type are rarely depicted on the Sasanian silver plates that have survived although many minor vessels refer in their decoration to the watery world of fish and birds. The distant model for this more elaborate scene is probably some version of Nilotic imagery a subject which was popular in the art of the late east Roman world. On Roman examples, fishermen in boats spear and net fish, the varieties depicted in considerable detail, among occasional water monsters, Nilotic plants and Nereids. Another subject depicted on Roman silver vessels is Oceanus, a personification of the world ocean, accompanied by Nereids, Tritons and hybrid sea monsters. In contrast to these crowded and often chaotic ‘natural’ scenes, the Sasanian representations are simplified and ordered although they are also, in all probability, a celebration of the fertility of the waters, a most sacred element in the Zoroastrian universe.

The neat quartering of the plate’s surface is apparent in the placement of the four boats and by the arrangement of the apparently benevolent supernatural creatures, combinations of animal fish and bird. The small nude ‘swimmers’, in two cases winged, also place the scene in an other-worldly perhaps paradisaical environment.

The life-giving significance of Water for Zoroastrian believers is evident in Zoroastrian creation accounts concerning the sea Vourukasha and the flat plate at its center from which mountains arise. On this plate the central disc may refer to the earth, the habitat of the guinea fowl appearing on it. Certainly an expression of the richness and fertility of the waters, the scene on the gilded silver plate may also have paradisaical and cosmological significance.
25 • Dish with Bahram Gur and Azada
Late 6th – first half of the 7th century • Silver, traces of gilding • 21.7 cm
State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 25230

Much of the surface of this dish is occupied by a rider on a camel. He pulls back his bow to release arrows at fast-running gazelles, three bucks and a doe. One of his arrows has cut through the antler of a buck while two others have pierced the doe’s forehead, giving her the appearance of a buck with antlers. In this way the buck appears without antlers while the doe is transformed into a buck displaying the prowess of the archer. A woman seated behind the rider on the camel has one arm raised in a gesture of adoration. This is clearly a scene showing King Bahram Gur and his Roman slave/concubine Azada. Bahram Gur was a Sasanian ruler who became a popular hero in Persian literature and art, not only during the Sasanian period, but in subsequent centuries. The subject of Bahram Gur and Azada out hunting appears frequently in Persian miniatures.

Despite the expressive nature of the image, the craftsman’s work appears crude. The camel is rather too small for his rider, his neck too slender; Bahram Gur’s features are angular and schematic. The figure of Azada is disproportionately small beside that of the king, although this was probably a way of emphasising her lowly status. In accordance with the conventions of Sasanian art the king’s face is shown in profile but his eye and his shoulders are presented frontally. The craftsman carefully depicted the minor details of the clothing, shoes and jewellery; again in the manner characteristic of Sasanian metalwork. In contrast with the static and clumsy camel, the gazelles seem almost to fly as they flee.

Engraved on the bottom of the vessel is an inscription of three lines: ‘Property of Mihrbozed. 250 drachma weight.’

The dish was found in 1927 by a shepherd in Vyatka Province. The hoard included Iranian, Byzantine and Central Asian objects.

26 • Bronze plaque
Hamadan • Bronze • 8 x 8.5 cm
National Museum of Iran, Tehran 1391

The griffin appearing on this plaque differs from most Sasanian examples as depicted on seal stones and in other media of art. In Sasanian images, the griffin is shown with upright ears and usually in a springing or crouching pose. The griffin motif had royal connotations in Sasanian art where it supports thrones and decorates princely headdress. The leonine pose of this griffin and the absence of ears are indications that the object was not made in a Sasanian workshop.

27 • Silver plate with king on a horse with winged figure holding diadem
Provenance unknown • Silver • 23 x 4.5 cm
National Museum of Iran, Tehran 5116

The diadem-bearing putto appears on early Sasanian and Parthian rock reliefs and is influenced by Roman art. The putto appears on late Sasanian plates, hovering over a banqueting king or in mythological scenes, which is likely a reference to the invincibility of the monarch rather than to Zoroastrian concepts.
28 • Stucco with lion pattern
Hajiabad, Fars • 4th century CE • Plaster lion’s head enclosed in a circular frame • 18 x 11.5 cm
National Museum of Iran, Tehran, 4693
This piece was discovered in Hajiabad at a site excavated by Dr. Azarnoosh in 1978, in a building complex dating from the reign of Shahpur II where fragments of stucco depicting decorative motifs, figurines and fantastical creatures were found.

29 • Stucco with boar’s head
Tape Hesar, Damghan • 40 x 38 cm
National Museum of Iran, 601
The motif of a boar’s head is frequently found on Sasanian textiles and stucco work. In one of the ancient Yashis (hymns addressed to the divinities of Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian divinities) of the Avesta, the boar is one of ten manifestation of the Vereheraginha, a divinity associated with strength and victory in battle. (35: 14-15).

30 • Stone relief showing a winged figure
Persepolis, Iran • stone • 68 x 33 cm
National Museum of Iran, Tehran, 8
The stone relief from Persepolis shows a bearded male figure with a long tiara inside a winged disc, holding a ring in his left hand and the right hand raised. He wears a Persian court style dress. Similar representations of deities holding the ring of power towards a king can be found in the royal iconography from ancient Mesopotamia to the Sasanian Period. The form of winged figures vary from the Egyptian god Horus to the Assyrian god, Ashur. There are several types of winged figures in Achaemenid art with different forms of wings, holding either rings or a lotus. The type of winged figure holding a ring is often interpreted as the Achaemenid supreme god Ahuramazda, or farr (divine glory), or in a Zoroastrian context as a fravahar.

This winged figure is one of the last reliefs carved at Persepolis. The artistic style relates it to the reign of Artaxerxes III (358-338 BCE) at the end of the Achaemenid period. The size and the rosette band demonstrate that the relief was probably decorating the central façade of a building’s staircase. Although the exact find spot of the relief is unclear, considering the style and some details, it probably belonged to Palace G (founded by Artaxerxes III). The building has now disappeared, except for the foundations and some scattered or reinstalled reliefs left at the site.
MAZDAKISM

Mazdakism was a heretical movement within Zoroastrianism that caused considerable social upheaval in Sasanian Iran during the 5th and 6th centuries CE by demanding that men should share property and women in common. Its eponymous founder was Mazdak, son of Bamdad, a religious leader and follower of the teachings of a certain Zaradusht-i Khurragan of Fasa, who is described as a contemporary of Mani (d. 277 CE) and said to have introduced innovations into Zoroastrianism. According to Ferdowsi’s epic the Shahnameh, Mazdak proclaimed:

There are five things which turn wise men from the truth. They are envy, anger, hatred, and needs which are usually followed by greed. If you overcome these five Divs, the path of the Lord of the universe will emerge clearly before you. The incitements to these five are worldly possessions and women. It is because of this that the Good Religion has waned in the world. If you wish to avert harm from the Good Religion, women and possessions must be shared in common. Mazdak taught that God had created all men alike and hence all means of sustenance and procreation should be divided up equally between them. Women and property should be held in partnership like water, fire and pasture. Nobody should have more than others, and sharing was a religious duty. Mazdak is said to have succeeded in convincing the ruler Kavad I (r. 488–496, 498–531) of his ideas. Under Kavad’s influence Kavad implemented some of them, in particular those concerning women, and chaos ensued in which the common people rose up against the rich, stealing their wives and property, and people grew confused about their parentage and family line. In 496, in an attempt to reintroduce order, a group of insurgent nobles and priests dethroned Kavad for heresy and expelled him to the realm of the Hephthalites to the east of the empire, but Kavad regained the throne with Hephthalite help two years later and ruled without interruption for another 33 years until his death in 531 CE.

Kavad’s son and successor Khosrow I Anoshirvan (r. 531–579) crushed the revolt and executed Mazdak and a large number of his followers. According to the Shahnameh, Khosrow turned the execution into a spectacle and Ferdowsi concludes his account with a moral admonition:

Kasrā [= Khosrow] owned an estate with high walls. He ordered holes to be dug there and had the followers of Mazdak implanted, heads in the ground and feet upwards. Then to Mazdak Kasrā said, “Go to that magnificent garden and see how the seed that you have planted in this world has borne fruit. You shall see trees that no one has ever seen or heard of before.” Mazdak went and opened the garden gate. As he saw what was within he uttered a cry and fell unconscious. Then Kasrā ordered a tall gallows to be erected and strung the unfortunate man up alive, later killing him with a shower of arrows. (If you are wise, do not follow the path of Mazdak.)

The execution of Mazdak

North India • Early 17th century
British Library Add. 5600, ff. 452v-453r

This copy of the Shahnameh probably originates from the 15th century but was refurbished around 1613 in the studio of the Mughal statesman Khankhanan ‘Abd al-Rahim. The artist of this painting was the well-known Mughal painter Banwari.
The revelations of Arda Viraz (‘righteous Viraz’), or Viraf, as his name has been transcribed in Persian, were written in Pahlavi (pre-Islamic Persian) during the early Islamic period, and reflect a time of religious instability. The story is set in the reign of the founder of the Sasanian Empire, Ardashir I (r. 224-241). It describes how the Zoroastrian community selected the righteous Viraz to visit the world of the dead returning with an account of the rewards and punishments in store. Although the story did not assume its definitive form until the 9th to 10th centuries CE, it can be regarded as part of a tradition of visionary accounts, the earliest of which is found in present-day Iran in the third-century inscriptions of the Zoroastrian high priest Kidar.

Many copies of this popular story survive in both prose and verse, and several include vivid illustrations. One (Catalogue 103) is the Arda Viraf Nameh composed in Iran in verse at the end of the 13th century by Zartosht Bahram Pazhdu and copied in Navsari in 1789. Also on display is another illustrated copy of the same work completed 47 years earlier in Surat in 1742 by Mobad Rostam ibn Bahram ibn Darab ibn Sotrab ibn Manak ibn Pechotan Sanjanah who also copied an Avestan Videvdad sadah in Surat in 1759. This volume contains in addition to the Arda Viraf Nameh, a poem about a meeting of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 998-1039) with a Zoroastrian dastur. The illustrations in Catalogue 101 and the National Museum manuscript are very similar showing a continuity of style in this kind of didactic literature which re-enforces the story’s underlying importance as a Zoroastrian pedagogic text.

This illustration is titled ‘The souls of the women who were obedient to their husbands’. It forms an exact counterpart to Catalogue 101 in which we see the punishments meted out in hell to the souls of wives who disobey their husbands and argue with them. In contrast, the wives here are portrayed in a paradisiacal garden surrounded by flowers and trees and a flowing stream. Watching them are Arda Viraf (centre) with his two guides, the divinities Srosh and Ardibehesht Amshasfand. This manuscript copy of the Arda Viraf Nameh by Zartosht Bahram Pazhdu is dated 1742 and contains 117 illustrations in the Western Indian style.
THE SHAHNAMEH

The Shahnameh is a classic work written by the great poet of Iran, Abol Qasim Ferdowsi. He took more than thirty years to complete this masterpiece, which consists of more than 60,000 verses. Composed in Persian, the poetry narrates the heroic deeds, valour, achievements, and love stories of the Kings of Iran from the time of the mythical Gayomars to the last Sasanian king, Yazdegerd III (d. 651). Each of the fifty chapters in the Shahnameh highlights the actions and achievements of each king. Offering a glimpse into cultural and political aspects of Iranian royal life, the Shahnameh also reveals its social customs, traditions, and architecture, thus weaving a complete narrative of the history, culture and civilization of Iran from ancient times to the Islamic conquest.

Subsequently it has played a significant role in the development of Iranian culture and has enriched both the Persian language and its literature. Reciting and attending Shahnameh performances became an established tradition in Iran and there are many versions of the stories in both poetry and prose.

The Shahnameh on display (National Museum, Delhi Acc. No. L 53.2/8) was copied in Lahore by Malik Sharafuddin Qadiri and dates from 1246 AH/1830 CE. It contains one hundred and fifty nine beautiful paintings of the Lahore school, which are considered to be by the well-known artist Imam Bakhsh Lahauri. The manuscript has two prefaces, the first with four illustrations and a highly illuminated frontispiece (sar-i lawh) displaying intricate geometrical ornamentation. The initial illustrations portray Ferdowsi as a central figure. The second preface has three illustrated folios. The first depicts Ferdowsi reciting the Shahnameh before Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna and is followed by paintings of Solomon and Sheba on facing pages.

The miniatures show the use of precious pigments derived from lapis lazuli and gold, together with shades and hues of green, red and blue. They depict scenes from the royal court, gardens and battle scenes. Human figures have been treated with utmost care showing each one in a variety of costumes, headgears and engaged in various activities. Similarly, the flora and fauna are depicted in detail, embellishing the horizons and giving perspective to the illustrations. The first two pages of the Shahnameh are illustrated ornately with gold and lapis lazuli on floral patterns. The text is written in nasta’liq calligraphy, enhanced by Imam Bakhsh’s illustrations which, though in a later Mughal style, present a synthesis, or assimilation of the indigenous form combined with Persian aesthetics.

The encounters between the enemy kingdoms of Iran and Turan (Ariya and Turya of the Avesta) that are the subject of the heroic section of the Shahnameh produce heroes on each side. While the hero Rostam (Supplement 1-3) is not mentioned in the Avesta his enemy Afrasiyab, the king of Turan, is Frangrasyan of the Avesta who is described there as evil and villainous. He is depicted as the chief enemy of the Iranian race who constantly strove to capture the divine fortune or glory (khvarenah) which would enable him to rule. The episode illustrated in the Shahnameh here occurs at the end of the story of Bizhan and Manizheh (Afrasiyab’s daughter). Having freed Bizhan from the cave where he had been held Afrasiyab’s prisoner, Rostam provokes an enraged Afrasiyab into battle. Afrasiyab, thoroughly defeated, retreats leaving his army, elephants and equipment to be captured by Rostam.
Zal summons the Simorgh when Rostam is wounded

Lahore • 1246 AH/1830 CE • Opaque watercolour and ink on paper • 42.3 x 27.3 cm
National Museum Delhi Acc. No. L 53.2/8, folio 376r

The *Shahnameh* describes how in the battle between Rostam and King Goshtasp's son Esfandiyar, Rostam was seriously wounded and returned to his father's court in Zabolistan. Zal summoned help from the Simorgh by burning one of her feathers (see Catalogue p. 132, 133, 154). The Simorgh first reprimands Rostam for confronting Esfandiyar (who is not only of royal descent but can also claim divine lineage since king Goshtasp was Zoroaster's first follower and subsequently made immune from misfortune). She then heals Rostam and Rakhsh's wounds and shows Rostam how to make an arrow of tamarisk wood with which he could kill Esfandiyar should it be necessary.
In the ancient world coins were used to show various Zoroastrian divinities (yazatas) who were associated with the khvarenah, or kingly glory, as well as the rituals in connection with the royal fire. The Kushan kings of Bactria used a mixture of Hindu and Zoroastrian deities on their coins and both coin and royal inscriptions such as the Bactrian inscription discovered at Rabatak in Afghanistan suggest that the Kushan pantheon included Iranian divinities.

The inscriptions on Kushan coins are in Bactrian, an Iranian language using the Greek script. On one side they show the ruler and on the other an image of the god who is individually named.

On display are coins depicting: the goddess Nana (generally equated with Anahita the Zoroastrian goddess of waters and fertility) seated on a lion (a) and standing (b); Pharro/Khvarenah, ‘kingly glory’, holding a staff and flames (d), and wearing a winged crown (c,e); Miro/Mithra (f,g) also written Muro; Mao/Mah, ‘moon’ (h); and Athsho, the Bactrian word for ‘fire’ (i).
The Bistun inscription and texts from Persepolis show that the Ancient Persians initially used a luni-solar calendar similar to that of the Babylonians, with twelve months of thirty days each, and some system of intercalation to regulate the length of year. The names of the months related to specific seasonal activity, such as ‘harvesting,’ to religious praxis, such as ‘the worship of fire,’ or referred to the time of the year according to temperature, such as ‘the stage of heat.’

When the Ancient Persians adopted the Egyptian calendar around the early 5th century BCE, five epagomenal days were added at the end of the year; this maintained the beginning of the calendar in the spring and the seasonal festivals at the correct time. A Cappadocian solar calendar, attested in Greek astronomical texts, appears to have implemented a calendar based on the Avesta, including a particular time dedicated to the yazatas – a time also mentioned in Elamite texts from Persepolis. The Avestan calendar was in place during the Seleucid then Parthian period, and became the model for the modern liturgical calendar of the Zoroastrians. The other months of the religious calendar were named after the creator (Av. dadvah) Ahura Mazda, the six yazatas, and the yazatas Mithra, Tishtrya, the water (ahan), and fire (atar). A day in the month was named after each of these four yazatas respectively.

By the beginning of the Sassanian period, the 365-day year introduced earlier had shifted the liturgical calendar out of sync with the natural year; the month Farvardin had receded from the spring equinox. To restore Noruz (the day of the spring equinox) and the other seasonal festivals to their original settings, the calendar was recalibrated sometime around 500 CE. This adjustment placed Nowruz at the beginning of the ninth month (Aidar), although some continued to celebrate it at the beginning of the first month of the year (on 1 Farvardin). Further calendrical modifications implemented in the 11th century under the Persian philosopher and scientist Fath Allah Shirazi to devise a new ‘Divine’ era, the Tarikh-i Habi, which was backdated to 21 March 1556.

Like the Jalali era established by the Seljuk Malik Shah in 1059, the beginning of the Tarikh-i Habi coincided with the vernal equinox. It was a solar year and used the Iranian (Zoroastrian in origin) month and day names. The details are described in the official history of the reign, the Akbarnamah (Supplement 37), compiled by Abu’l-Fazl, Akbar’s chief minister. In addition to setting out the month and day names, Akbar re-introduced thirteen festivals which, Abu’l-Fazl wrote, had been observed for the last thousand years by just princes and righteous philosophers, but had fallen from favour in India. These were the Zoroastrian festivals of Noruz, 19th Farvardin (Farvardegan), 3rd Ardbehesht (Jashn of Ardvahisht), 6th Khordad (Khoradgan), 13th Tir (Tirgan), 7th Mordad (Jashn of Amordad), 4th Shahrivar (Jashn of Shahrevar), 6th Mehr (Mehrigan), 10th Abar (Abahang), 9th Azar (Azarang), 8th, 15th and 23rd Dai (Jashn-i dadvah ‘the Creator’), 2nd Bahman (Bahmanagan), and 9th Esfandarmi (Esfandagan). Observing these festivals was decreed to be compulsory although it is doubtful if many were commonly celebrated by non-Zoroastrians.
Akbar's decree for establishing a new divine era

North India • 20 Shawwal 1232 (1817)

British Library Add. 26203, ff 161v-162r

The beginning of book two of the Akbarnameh, the official history of Akbar’s reign by Abu’l-Fazl, Akbar’s chief minister. This opening describes the inauguration in 1584 of the Tarikh-i Ilahi or ‘Divine Era’ and shows Akbar dictating the imperial edict (farman) which brought it into effect.

On the establishment of the new ‘Divine Era’

His Majesty, King of Kings, through his fortune and greatness and by divine inspiration, himself designated this glorious epoch the Divine Era (Tarikh-i Ilahi) and it was recorded in official documents and registers. The names of the months of the Era were made identical with the well-known names of the Persian months, but were additionally named ‘Divine’ (Ilahi) – for example: Farvardin, Divine month, Ardibehesht, Divine month. The names of the days were the same as those of the current thirty Persian days, arranged in this order:

Ormazd, Bahman, Ardibehesht, Shahrivar, Esfandarmad, Khordad, Amordad, Depadar, Adar, Aban, Khor, Mah, Tir, Gosh, Depamehr, Mehr, Sroh, Rashn, Farvardin, Bahram, Ram, Bad, Depadin, Din, Ard, Ashtad, Asman, Zamyad, Maresfand, Aneran.

Akbarnameh, vol. 2
These coins of the Emperor Akbar show the Zoroastrian month names. On display are coins dedicated to the months: (l, m) Farvardin (March/April) the first month of the year, (n) Ardibehesht (April/May), (o) Khordad (May/June), (p) Amordad (July/August), (q) Shahrevar (August/September), (r) Mehr (September/October) and (s) Esfand (Feb/March) the last month of the year. Mehr is the name of the Iranian god of the sun, seasons and contracts, Mithra. Azar is fire.

These coins show the Zoroastrian months: (t) Tir (June/July), (u) Aban (October/November), (v) Day (December/January) and (w) Bahman (January/February). Aban is Anahita, the goddess of All Waters and Fertility. Bahman/Vohu Manah ('Good Purpose, Intention') is one of the seven holy creations (amesha spentas). ...
AZAR KAYVAN AND THE DASATIR-I ASMANI

Of those who exerted an undoubted influence on Akbar's religious policies, one of the more charismatic was Azar Kayvan (1533-1618) who emigrated with his disciples from the repressive Shi’ism of Safavid Iran in the late 16th century. In 1578, he arrived in Mughal India at the invitation of the emperor Akbar and his chief minister Abul Fazl. The Azar Kayvanis (known also as Azazi, Avari, Abadi, Allah-mahmud or Spasine) propounded a neo-Zoroastrian world-view, which sought to reconcile the pre-Islamic past with Islamic philosophy, particularly millenarian or more specifically Nuskhian ideas.

The Azar Kayvanis consisted of cycles governed by planets and fixed stars, beginning with the pre-Adamite age of Mahabad (‘The Great Abad’). Ritual worship took place in temples dedicated to the planets—see, for example, the statues of Kayvan (Saturn) and Hormuzd (Jupiter) illustrated in the Darabantan-e-Mazahib (Catalogue 122), one of our most important sources for the study of the religion, composed by Mohed Shah sometime before 1688. Within this cosmological framework there was a sophisticated set of ritual and practice drawing on Indian, Islamic and Zoroastrian traditions which ultimately enabled union with the divine.

The Azar Kayvanis identified a series of pre-Islamic prophets (yakhshu) and, in Persian dated 10 Esfandarmaz regnal year 40 (1596) granting 300 bighas of land as madad-i ma‘ash (daily sustenance) to Meherji Rana’s son Bighas. The earliest of the documents is no longer preserved but references to the ma’ash (daily sustenance) to Meherji Rana’s son Bighas is a link between Meherji Rana and Akbar. The earliest documents, first mentioned in the famous debates held in the ‘Ibadat-khaneh of Akbar’s vizier, Abu’l-Fazl, mentions that Parsis took part in the famous debates held in the ‘Ibadat-khaneh (‘House of Worship’) at Fatehpur Sikri in 1578 and the historian ‘Abd al-Qadir Bada’uni writes in more detail:

Fire-worshippers also had come from Nasurti in Gujarat, and proved to His Majesty the truth of Zoroaster’s doctrines. They called fire-worship ‘the great worship,’ and impressed the emperor so favorably, that he learned from them the religious terms and rites of the old Parsis, and ordered Abu’l-Fazl to make arrangements, that sacred fire should be kept burning at court by day and by night, according to the custom of the ancient Persian kings, in whose fire-temples it had been continually burning, for fire was one of the manifestations of God, and ‘a tip of His rays.’ 41

AZAR KAYVAN'S 'CELESTIAL RULES'

This opening shows the beginning of the Dasatir-i asmani (‘celestial rules’). The fully vocalized ‘celestial’ language is overlaid in red and followed by a Persian paraphrase and comments.

41 Azar Kayvan’s ‘Celestial rules’ Late 17th or early 18th century British Library Or.11967, ff. 51v-52r

42 • Avestan hymn to the sun
Late 17th or early 18th century
British Library Or.11967, ff. 51v-52r

Directly following the end of the Dasatir on the right-hand page, is a modified version, on the left, of the Avestan hymn, the Khosraušnīyūn ‘Praise to the sun’, transcribed into Persian script with an interlinear Persian translation.

The Avestan text is overlaid in red and followed by the Persian translation.
A circular bronze plaque, embellished with a laurel wreath and fixed on the façade of the principal’s bungalow in the grounds of the Sir JJ School of Art and Architecture, states that Rudyard Kipling was born here.  

A year before Rudyard’s birth his father, John Lockwood Kipling, was appointed to the newly created post of ‘Artist-craftsmen at the Sir JJ School of Art and Industry’, established in 1853 by Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy the First Parsi Baronet. One of Lockwood’s early students was the thirteen-year old aspiring artist, Pestonjee Bomanjee (1851-1938), who later became the principal portraitist of the school. In the first art class he attended, Lockwood gave Bomanjee a small rosette to be modeled in clay. Impressed by his workmanship, Lockwood selected him to supply the ornamentation samples required for the Gothic buildings being constructed on Hornby Road, a mile and a half from the Art School. Thus Bomanjee began his career more as a sculptor than a portraitist.

Rudyard Kipling grew up amid the sylvan surroundings of the Sir JJ School of Art where Bomanjee frequently encountered him playing. Bomanjee described Rudyard as an impish child who, unknown to his father, would wander across the compound to the School of Art where Bomanjee and other artists were modelling and pelt them with clay pellets before being discovered and sent home by his father. Harry Ricketts notes that Rudyard remembered ‘vast green spaces and wonderful walks through coconut woods on the edge of the sea where the Parsees waded in and prayed to the rising sun’. This was perhaps Kiplings earliest memory of the Parsees. His early encounters with Pestonjee Bomanjee inspired Rudyard to weave a fanciful and whimsical tale centred on the artist. It was one of the bedtime stories Rudyard told his daughter Josephine.

The central character, a Parsi who lived ‘on an uninhabited island on the shores of the Red Sea… and from whose hat the rays of the sun were reflected in more-than-oriental splendour’ was Rudyard’s imaginary description of Pestonjee Bomanjee. The story revolves around a Rhinoceros who rudely interrupted a Parsi just as he was beginning to eat his freshly baked cake, and how the Parsi then took revenge on the beast. The curious lesson to be learned from this strange adventure was put into verse by Kipling.

Them that takes cakes
Which the Parsee-man bakes
Makes dreadful mistakes.

FPM, PJG

In a note opposite his portrait Kipling confirms: “This is the Parsee Pestonjee Bomanjee sitting in his palm tree… wearing a new more-than-Oriental-Splendour hat of the sort that Parsees wear…” Rudyard Kipling thus immortalised Pestonjee Bomanjee in the world of English literature and the genre of nonsense verse. Three allusions are worth noting: first, the suggestion of ‘a new style of hat’ is perhaps a reference to the stiff shiny paghri worn by the Parsees on ceremonial occasions. Secondly, the Parsi climbing a palm tree with a knife in his hand may refer to toddy tapping, which the Parsees were well known for. Thirdly, Kipling’s rhyme alludes to the penalty one has to pay for violating Parsi food laws. Here he may be referring to the consecrated religious food of the Parsees.
PARSI TEXTILES AND EMBROIDERY

Zoroastrian culture celebrates the bounty and beauty of creation. Embroidery is a vital part of this love of life, reflecting Zoroastrian women’s innate creativity.

Complex roots and routes lie behind ‘Parsi embroidery’. This tradition began in Iran, its motifs travelled through the Silk Route into China and then came back with Chinese, Indian and European influences to a small group of its originators, now called the Parsi Zoroastrians of India.

In Iran, the traditional costume was loose trousers and a long tunic, which reached the knees. The head traditionally was covered with ashawl and the entire costume embroidered with simple motifs derived from nature. Almost a thousand years after fleeing Iran, Parsi women’s wardrobes contained these items, now called jurs and jhablas, which were worn under the Gujarati sari instead of petticoats.

The China connection with Persia was the result of a long sea trade link; this would change much later into a sea trade link with Indian Parsis. The Chinese had a long tradition of embroidery and silk textiles, exporting their embroidery to Europe as early as the 11th century. From 1756, for almost 200 years, Parsi traders prospered, trading at Canton, Macau, Hong Kong and Shanghai.

Legend has it that a Parsi trader in Canton, watching the embroidery of a rich silk requested the craftsmen to embroider six yards of silk as a sari for his wife in India. These first pieces, embroidered on heavy satin, have no borders or scallops and seem like yardage. They often carried Buddhist symbols of protection such as the Divine Fungus because embroidery to China was a sacred art. To facilitate the wearer and to customize this cloth into a sari, the top was left unembroidered, as was one edge, to make it easier to tuck in at the waist. Parsi women, following Indian patterns began designing borders (koori) to match the inner embroidery, then frontage (pallav) to highlight the design. Chinese yardage had developed into a sari. Embroidered yardage was covered on all four sides as if bordered within a frame. This yardage, called gala in Gujarati, gave its name to the goro.

The colours favoured in the Persian tradition were imperial purple and other rich shades. As Indian influence developed, the auspicious vermilion became a favourite. Parsis wear white, symbolizing purity, at their weddings, but a tradition of using red developed, particularly for engagement saris. Intercultural exchanges continued in the motifs. The Indian Ambi, Persian Cypress and Chinese baskets combined to create powerful motifs. Parsi women preferred white and cream rather than typical Chinese multicoloured embroidery, because it matched the white lace sashots every woman wore. The influence of Imperial Europe became evident through scallops, bows and ribbons, thus bringing together four cultures in the Parsi sari.

As the trade for Parsi saris from China grew in volume, Chinese vendors began regularly visiting Parsi households in Gujarat. As a close relationship developed with their clients, they would leave their merchandise on a particular veranda. While waiting for the cool of the evening they would take out their embroidery rings and start work observed by Parsi women who watched their embroidery with interest, assimilating their techniques and stitches into their own work. In this way, Chinese embroidery became part of Parsi craft.

Dating this craft is difficult. The Victoria and Albert Museum archives contain a collection of Parsi embroidery which gives us some specific dates. The Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 provided an impetus to collect textiles from all parts of the Empire.

The earliest dates available on record for Parsi embroidery are 1852, while a large archive was acquired in 1883. Several of the Parsi jhablas, jira and borders clearly state ‘Parsi women’s embroidery’ and do not have typical Chinese motifs.

As times changed, Parsi embroidery became less popular, giving way to light chiffon saris which could not take heavy embroidery. Its recent revival is a way of reaffirming identity and connecting the community to its roots.
The jhabla is a smock-like blouse made from a single piece of cloth. The neckline is gathered with a ribbon and the jhabla falls just above the knees. This jhabla is embellished on the hem, sleeves and the neck. The neckline is finished with a stylized bat hanging upside down, to symbolize good fortune and happiness. Closely set flowering vines, weeping willows, cranes and butterflies create the setting of a garden and carefully placed Chinese men and women holding Taoist symbols of a flywhisk, gourd and fan wish the wearer of the jhabla protection, blessings, goodness and long life. During the China trade it became fashionable for children to wear densely embroidered jhablas with Chinese embroidery. Some had jari (gold and silver wire) work on them.

This is a fine example of a Cheena Cheeni gara - so termed in Gujarati because of the presence of Chinese men and women. The ground depicts a social scene set in a garden with repeat registers running the length of the sari and embroidered with flowering plants, pavilions and Chinese figures holding Taoist symbols. Significant in Chinese mythology is the motif of a bridge with a dog crossing over it which is carefully embroidered together with zig-zag fences interspersed with the sacred fungus. The piece is embellished by a densely embroidered border in satin stitch.
Gara for festive occasions
India • 20th century • embroidered silk
Private collection

Chrysanthemums, daisies and roses representing immortality and embroidered in satin stitch cover the ground of the gara. Flying birds and flowering vines add a sense of motion to an otherwise static design. The white satin stitch embroidery in silk thread is offset against the red background colour. Saris such as this are worn on festive occasions by Parsi women.
This unusual gara depicting elephants, Bactrian camels, lions, leopards, a giraffe, an elk and a kangaroo reflects the interest created by naturalists who, as part of a colonial exploration of the flora and fauna of countries such as China, Africa and India, gave rise to a display of curiosities such as seen here. British naturalists were prominent during the Qing dynasty (1839-1911) a period when the Parsi traders were also in China. Several Chinese artists were trained by naturalists in the 19th century, to draw and paint the flowers and animals recorded by them. Frequently the same artists drew the pattern designs for the embroidery on textiles and porcelain.
In nineteenth-century Iran there were a number of regulations governing the everyday lives of Zoroastrians. These were intended to marginalize and distinguish them from the majority Muslim population and included strict dress codes. Zoroastrian men were obliged to wear garments of yellow ochre or unbleached cloth. In Yazd and Kerman Zoroastrians were not permitted to buy cloth by the yard. Shopkeepers would collect the strips of leftover fabric and leave them in bins outside their shops for Zoroastrians to buy. These were laboriously stitched together to make the shalvar and kamiz and were often embroidered with a variety of designs, including flowers, fish and geometric patterns. This traditional Yazdi bridal shalvar features a pink, blue, and maroon striped trouser with a woven black and cream cotton band. It is made of 28 multi coloured strips of silk, cotton and calico cloth stitched together to form the width of each leg of the trouser. A thick, woven cotton band, which is hidden beneath the skirt of the kamiz is gathered at the waist by a ribbon allowing the folds to gather at the ankle.

A makhnum is a large head and body scarf, which frames the face, and falls loosely over the shoulders to the waist. It was customary for women to wear several layers of scarves over the makhnum; often as many as seven layers were worn one over the other. A laachak is a small bordered bonnet tied with ribbons under the chin. The laachak is worn under the makhnum. 
In Canton, foreign traders had to deal with a number of Chinese officials appointed by the Emperor to facilitate trade between China and the rest of the world. The movement of foreigners was restricted by law and, during the trading season, they were allowed to live in the thirteen factories, or trading houses, on the shores of the Pearl River in an area called the ‘Foreign Concession’. The factories were owned by rich Chinese merchants called Co-Hongs and each factory flew the flag of European country to which it belonged.

By 1760, an increasing number of ships belonging to the East India Company began to arrive in Canton. Not wishing to deal with foreign traders, and averse to western culture, the Celestial Court appointed Chinese merchant houses known as Hongs to deal with the foreigners. The Co-Hongs along with the Viceroy, who dealt with all civil matters, and the Hoppo, who was the superintendent of Maritime Customs, worked together to ensure that the behaviour of the traders was not in violation of Chinese law and above all that the Imperial Court received custom duties and the taxes due to it. Custom duties collected by the Hoppo were sent directly to the Emperor.

Smuggling was endemic and the Hoppo and his men had to keep a constant watch over the small Chinese junks that sailed in and out of the Pearl River - many without paying duty on the goods they carried. The Viceroy, Hoppo and Co-Hongs worked together ensuring that all dues were paid to the Imperial Court. This arrangement was known as the ‘Canton system’, which lasted from 1700 to 1842 and was brought to an end by the First Opium War. After the trading season, all foreign traders had to return home or stay on the island of Macao. Interestingly no women were allowed to live in Canton.

Canton was an important port through which Chinese porcelain was exported. The blue and white Canton-ware was manufactured in the Province of Ching-Te Chen and sent to Canton for Chinese artists to design and decorate in vibrant shades of blue. Canton-ware with Chinese scenes, flowers and birds, delighted much of Europe and India in the nineteenth century. Every home had a piece of porcelain, some with the finesse and fragility of an eggshell, and so named eggshell porcelain. Others prepared at cruder kilns were of varying thickness and referred to as Canton pattern porcelain. It was readily available in the many shops that dotted the byelanes of the factory area in Canton.

Porcelain jars when exported from China were protected by a tightly wound rope which covered the surface of the jar thus protecting it from damage during long sea voyages. When porcelain jars or plates broke during the voyage, the fragmented pieces were laid as china mosaics on the floor of homes in Bombay. Porcelain jars were prized by the Parsis, who liked to display several pieces of delicate porcelain in their homes.
Indian homes in the 15th century were sparsely furnished. Europeans as colonists created a desire amongst Indians to adopt elevated, western-style furniture. ‘Bombay mahogany’ refers to elaborately carved black wood furniture. The dense carvings incorporated a mixture of Indian and Chinese designs - the latter made popular by the Portuguese who were among the first to trade with China. The legs of such pieces were often finished in dragon, griffin or lion motifs while elaborate floral patterns decorated the rest of the piece.

INDO PORTUGUESE CARVED FURNITURE

56 • Matching chairs
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection

57 • Sofa
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection

58 • Ottoman
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection

59 • Table with griffin legs
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection
60 • Matching chairs
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection

61 • Occasional table
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection

62 • Consol
Bombay • late 19th century
Private collection
Until the advent of the East India Company artists in India were dependent upon court patronage for their living. Supported by the Mughal Emperors and the Maharajas of various states, portrait painting was a popular form of art portraying the nobility, court scenes and festivals. When the East India Company extended their political control over large parts of India, they encouraged English and European artists to visit the country - many of whom were on leave from the Company - to map the ethnographic images, flora and fauna, and the historical landscape. Artists such as the uncle and nephew team of Thomas and William Daniel, William Hodges, Tilly Kettle, the first portraitist in India, Johann Zoffany and August Schoefft were some of the artists who came to India to paint the ‘exotic’ scenes. These artists were trained in European art schools and were familiar with the techniques of vanishing perspective and the play of light and shade. Such techniques were gradually introduced to court artists in India, many of whom trained under them.

In 1854 the East India Company began to establish art schools in India and by 1867 the British Government had set up 22 schools of art with the idea of employing the talents of local artists.

THE SIR JJ SCHOOL OF ART AND PARSİ ARTİSTS

In Bombay the leading China merchant, Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, donated Rs 100, 000 to start a school of art, which became the foundation of the genre known as the Bombay School of Art.

Among the first to study sculpture and modelling at the school was Pestonjee Romanjee, who trained under John Lockwood Kipling and later under John Griffiths. His work won admiration at home and abroad. Some of the well-known Parsi artists who trained at the school were M.F Pithawalla, J Lalkaka, Hormasji Deboo, Rustom Sodia and Erach Bhiwandiwalla. With the advent of photography it became possible to carry photographs and have portraits painted in places as far away as China or England.

The Parsi traders who were exposed in Canton to the European way of life recognised the importance of portraits as a way of asserting their position and influence in the community. The ensuing demand for portraits resulted in over seven hundred portraits of Parsi notables, both men and women, which can be viewed in public institutions, private residences and with collectors.
64 • Lady with blue ribbon
Artist unknown • late 20th century • oil on canvas
• 81 x 69 cm
Collection: Feroza and Rico Rustamjee

Jer Pestonjee Hormuji Jamsetjee was the granddaughter of the Parsi financier H.J. Rustomji who was a close friend of Jinnah. This exquisite portrait was painted on her 21st Birthday, 14th May 1921. The portrait is done in the style of Academic Realism, introduced by British artists and learned by Indian artists such as Pestonjee Bomanjee, A.X. Trinidade and H. Majumdar. 1912

65 • Bapuji Kharshedji Vatcha Gandhy
Artist: Rustom Siodia • Bombay • 1910 • oil on canvas
• 100.3 x 87 cm
Collection: Hameed Hacoc

Bapuji Vatcha Gandhi’s family were China traders. His ancestor, Modi Hirji Vatcha Gandhi, established the first Tower of Silence in Bombay in 1672. The family bought the land on Malabar Hill, where this early Tower of Silence is located, and donated it to the community. It is perhaps the oldest structure still standing in Bombay although it is rarely used. Bapuji’s family also founded a Fire Temple, which carries their name. The Parsi artist, Rustom Siodia, trained at the Sir J.J. School of Art. 1910.
A wall clock is an important feature of a Parsi Fire Temple. Priests serving the temple are required to perform rituals at precise times of the day especially when they serve the sacred fire. Curiously, these clocks are adjusted not according to Indian Standard time but to Mumbai Standard time in order for the priests to be exact about the timing of the ritual. The difference in time is 40 minutes and so if it is 12.40 pm Indian Standard time the clocks in the Fire temples show the time to be 12 noon.

This portrait was perhaps painted to commemorate an occasion such as a marriage or wedding anniversary. It is likely to have been done from a photograph.
68 • Sakerbai Ardeshir Bolton
Artist unknown • Bombay, India • mid-18th century
• oil on canvas • 114 x 76 cm
F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum, Bombay Parsi Punchayet, bequest of the late Ernavaz Dubash.

Sakerbai Ardeshir Bolton’s family owned the Bolton Rolling Steel Mills. She is depicted in a frontal pose favoured by early Indian and Chinese artists of the 19th century. Attired in traditional dress she is shown wearing a mathabana, a small muslin scarf under the part of the sari that covers her head. The sacred Zoroastrian under-shirt, sudreh can be seen to her right draped below her waist. The deep red Victorian day bed contrasts vividly with the colours of her sari and blouse. No European influence is apparent in her style of dress. [FM]

69 • Goolbai Dhunjishaw Bolton
Photograph in a Victorian moulded scroll frame
• Bombay • early 20th century • 60 x 52 cm
F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum, Bombay Parsi Punchayet, bequest of the late Ernavaz Dubash.

A studio portrait of a well to do Parsi lady from Bombay wearing a traditional Parsi sari with a border and a European style puff sleeved blouse. Photographic portraits became very fashionable in the early 20th century and several Parsi-owned photographic studios were set up in Bombay from the mid-19th century onwards. [FM]
70 • Seth Sorabji Behramji Bhabha
Artist: MF Pithawalla (1927), restored by DN Daruwalla (1992) • Bombay • oil on canvas • 147 x 116 cm
Bombay Parsi Punchayet

71 • Khan Bahadur Hormasjee Kharshedji Bhabha (1873 – 1940)
Artist: Probably MF Pithawalla (artist's name painted over by restorer), 20th century • Bombay • oil on canvas • 163 x 125 cm
Bombay Parsi Punchayet
An artist’s rendition of the Iranian Prophet Spitaman Zarathustra. M. F. Pithawalla’s portraits of Zarathustra were sought after and several Parsi Fire Temples and institutions have a portrait of the Prophet painted by him. (FPM)
Cooverjee Bhabha was married to Navajbai. Little is known of him except that he was a prominent cotton trader with business interests in Hong Kong and China. He invested in property in the residential Khetwadi district and the commercial Bazargate Street of Bombay. He founded Bhabha Sanitorium in Bandra, as a rest and recuperation centre for Parsis suffering from ill health. Parsis could stay at the sanitorium for a few weeks to enjoy the fresh sea air as the sanitorium was perched on a hill overlooking the sea. 

Kharshedji Bhabha

Cooverjee Hormasji Bhabha
(d. 13th January 1877)
Artist unknown • Bombay • early 20th century • oil on canvas • 145 x 116 cm
Bombay Parsi Punchayet

Kharshedji Behramjee Bhabha
Artist unknown • Bombay • early 20th century • oil on canvas • 106 x 90 cm
Bombay Parsi Punchayet
A pioneer of industry, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata has been called ‘the one-man planning commission of India. Eldest son of Nusserwanji Ratan Tata, he recognized the new, fast-changing period of enterprise and industrialization in India, establishing and financing several large textile mills in Bombay. He also founded a hydroelectric power station and put India on the map by envisaging a steel-manufacturing complex later established by his son Dorab Tata.

The 18th-19th century Parsis in Bombay started adapting the life-style of the British. As a corollary it became fashionable to get oneself portrayed and a number of Parsi portraits of this period are available today.

This portrait of a Parsi girl gives a glimpse of the attire of Parsi children of that age who would generally wear an ījar, jhabla, coat and a topi. The topi shows an indication of jari embroidery which was promoted by the Parsis along with the embroidery of the garas, sari borders and coats. Her long hair is arranged in a beautiful plait. She is stylishly supporting her arm on a decorative stand. The details of her costume with their intricate decoration as well as her long plait of hair are carved with the utmost care. The portrait could be of a young girl from one of the well-known Parsi families of Mumbai.


6 Ibid.

7 See D. Streame, 'Some Possible Sources for the Iconography of the Sasanian Sarcophagi in Elite Rhymes of Achaimenid and Parthian Date', in Genesis Forest: Collected Articles in Memory of Felix Z. Rosen-Marvian (Tehran, 2015): 137-147.


9 Compagni disputes the identification of this composite animal as the asuraan of Iranian mythology, suggesting that it is, rather, a representation of the Iranian concept of the farr, the divine glory', ibid.

10 Ibid. 14, VIZ.9.23.


12 Zandjaní textiles were previously thought to be Sogdian on account of an Arabic inscription on one of them being wrongly identified as Sogdian. See N. Sims-Williams and G. Khan, ‘Zandanıjī misidentified’, Vestnik drevnej istorii 10 (1996): 85-139.


42 I thank Dan Sheffield for this information and also for his help in identifying the Avestan texts mentioned here.

43 W.E. Gladstone Solomon, ‘Lockwood Kipling and the Bombay School of Art’, in H. Ricketts, Rudyard Kipling, A Life (New York, 2000): 6. Lockwood’s visit to the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 shaped his desire to be an artist and a craftsman. He received intensive training in Gothic as well as Italian ornamentation art.

44 H. Ricketts, Rudyard Kipling A Life (New York, 2000) 8. Lockwood’s visit to the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 shaped his desire to be an artist and a craftsman. He received intensive training in Gothic as well as Italian ornamentation art.

45 The carvings of the two semi-circular marble friezes that decorated the newly built Crawford Market and the fountain near the entrance were designs executed by Petrejevo Romanoje and other students studying sculpture under Lockwood.

Lenders to the Exhibition

British Library, London. Cat 2, 31, 37, 41, 42
British Museum, London. Cat 10, 17a, 17b, 33, 36, 39, 40
Bombay Parsi Punchayat. Cat 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74
Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS), Mumbai. Cat 75, 76
FD Alpawalla Museum, Bombay Parsi Punchayat. Cat 67, 68
Feroza & Rico Runstomjee. Cat 64
Firoza Punthakey Mistree. Cat 50, 51, 52, 53, 54
Hamed Harovm. Cat 63, 66
Homi Ranmans. Cat 45
National Museum, New Delhi. Cat 32, 33, 34
National Museum of Iran, Tehran. Cat 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30
North East History Foundation, Korea. Cat 4
Private Collection. Cat 56, 57
Private Collection. Cat 55
Private Collection. Cat 56, 57
Private Collection. Cat 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63
Raymond Mandelbrot. Cat 46, 49
Tata Services Ltd. Cat 77
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. Cat 1, 3, 5, 18, 19, 20, 25
Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Cat 12, 13, 14, 15

Photo Credits
Pavel Lurje. Cat 6, 8, 9, 10
Kaiyan Mistree. Cat 52, 53
Harshad Panchal. Cat 46, 48
Urushima Sims-Williams. Cat 11
Sarah Stewart. Cat 43, 44

Contributors to the catalogue

British Museum
Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis (VSC)

British Library
Ursula Sims-Williams (US-W)

Claremont University
Jenny Rose

Collège de France
Franz Grenet (FG)

National Museum, Delhi
Khanbur Rahmat (KR)

National Museum of Iran, Tehran
Zahra Akbari (ZA)
Shahrokh Ramjouei (SR)

SOAS
Jahan Foster (JF)
Almut Hintze (AH)
Sarah Stewart (SS)
Nicholas Sims-Williams (NS-W)

The State Hermitage Museum
Mariam Dandamaeva (MD)
Larisa Kulakova (LYK)
Pavel Lurje (PL)

Unesco Parzor
Sherman Cama (SC)

Zoroastrian Studies, Mumbai
Firoza Punthakay Mistree (FPM)

Independent Scholar
Phoren J Godrej
Prudence Harper
Supplement to the Catalogue
The Everlasting Flame, Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination
published by I.B. Tauris in Association with SOAS, University of London
(Copyright sign) 2013 SOAS, University of London