



Press Release
15 December 2020

Epic Iran

Gallery 39 and North Court

13 February – 30 August 2021

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- **First UK exhibition in 90 years to present an overarching narrative spanning 5,000 years of Iranian art, design and culture**
- **Rarely seen objects dating back to 3200 BC, drawn from the V&A collection alongside national and international loans**
- **Shining a light on Iran's great historic civilisation and its journey into the 21st century, showcasing works by leading contemporary artists based in Iran and overseas**

Opening February 2021, *Epic Iran* will explore 5,000 years of Iranian art, design and culture, bringing together over 300 objects from ancient, Islamic and contemporary Iran. It will be the UK's first major exhibition in 90 years to present an overarching narrative of Iran from 3000 BC to the present day. *Epic Iran* is organised by the V&A with the Iran Heritage Foundation in association with The Sarikhani Collection.

Iran was home to one of the great historic civilisations, yet its monumental artistic achievements remain unknown to many. *Epic Iran* will explore this civilisation and the country's journey into the 21st century, from the earliest known writing – signalling the beginning of history in Iran – through to the 1979 Revolution and beyond. Ranging from sculpture, ceramics and carpets, to textiles, photography and film, works will reflect the country's vibrant historic culture, architectural splendours, the abundance of myth, poetry and tradition that have been central to Iranian identity for millennia, and the evolving, self-renewing culture evident today. From the Cyrus Cylinder and intricate illuminated manuscripts of the *Shahnameh*, to ten-metre-long paintings of Isfahan tilework, Shirin Neshat's powerful two-screen video installation *Turbulent*, and Shirin Aliabadi's striking photograph of a young woman blowing bubblegum, the exhibition will offer a fresh perspective on a country that is so often seen through a different lens in the news.

The V&A has collected the art of Iran since the museum's founding over 150 years ago and has one of the world's leading collections from the medieval and modern periods. Drawing on well-known highlights as well as astonishing works that haven't been exhibited in living memory, *Epic Iran* will feature works from the V&A alongside important international loans and works from significant private collections, including The Sarikhani Collection.

Tristram Hunt, Director of the V&A says: "Ninety years since the last major UK exhibition to cover 5,000 years of Iranian art, design and culture, Iran has undergone a total transformation and the cultural landscape has changed dramatically. *Epic Iran* will serve a vital purpose in enabling audiences in Britain to discover more about one of the world's great historic civilisations and its incredible creative output in

the 21st century. This landmark exhibition will unite the ancient and Islamic study of Iran – often seen as two separate disciplines – alongside a powerful modern and contemporary section, allowing the Iranian people’s artistic achievements across millennia to be considered in their entirety.”

Epic Iran will feature ten sections set within an immersive design that will transport visitors to a city, complete with gatehouse, gardens, palace, and library. Designed by Gort Scott Architects, each section will have a different atmosphere, reflecting the objects displayed as well as their time and place in history.

The V&A would like to extend special thanks to those who have generously supported the Epic Iran exhibition: The Godwin Family, Darioush Winery, Cockayne – Grants for the Arts, a donor-advised fund of The London Community Foundation, The Ruddock Foundation for the Arts, The Soudavar Memorial Foundation, The Arah Foundation, Dr Amir Ali Farman-Farma and The Altajir Trust.

About the exhibition:

The first section introduces the **Land of Iran** with striking imagery of the country’s dramatic and varied landscapes. Iran is home to mountain ranges, searing deserts and salt pans, as well as lush forests and varied coastlines – all of which have shaped the country’s social, economic and political history – and it is from this landscape that the artistic cultures covered by *Epic Iran* emerged over the past 5,000 years.

Beginning at the dawn of history in 3200 BC, marked by the earliest known writing, **Emerging Iran** will show that even before the rise of the Persian Empire, Iran’s rich civilisation rivalled those of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Animals and nature are a recurring motif – reflecting their importance in society at the time – with ibexes, gazelles, lions, and birds decorating pottery, cups, axe heads and gold beakers. The section will also feature figurines and items from everyday life including earrings, belt fragments, and a board game. The Elamites dominated south-west Iran during this time, but from 1500 BC Iranian-speaking people began arriving from Central Asia.

The Persian Empire will span the Achaemenid period, starting in 550 BC when Cyrus the Great was crowned king of the Medes and Persians, uniting Iran politically for the first time. With its capital Persepolis, the empire became the most extensive of the pre-Roman world, with a rich artistic culture. Archaeological finds reveal insights into kingship and royal power, trade and governance of society, which will be explored in this dramatic section through stone reliefs from Persepolis, originally painted; large-scale casts with colours projected on to them; and metalwork such as jewellery, coins and gold and silverware. Highlights include the Cyrus Cylinder – on loan from the British Museum – often celebrated as the first declaration of human rights which can be misleading, and a gold armband in the V&A collection from the Oxus Treasure. The section will also feature a series of eight plaster casts from the V&A, cast from frieze panels from the Palace of Darius at Susa.

The fourth section, **Last of the Ancient Empires**, will cover a period of dynastic change with Alexander the Great overthrowing the Persian Empire in 331 BC. The Greeks were quickly replaced by the Parthians, who were in turn defeated by the Sasanians. 400 years of stable reign followed: Zoroastrianism became the state faith and strong art and architecture traditions developed, with the Sasanian style enduring long beyond the dynasty’s fall. The section will showcase Parthian and Sasanian sculpture, stone reliefs,

gold and silverware, coins, as well as Zoroastrian iconography. Highlights will include royal busts, such as a fifth century AD bust from The Sarikhani Collection, and a silver ewer from the Wyvern Collection, depicting women dancing.

John Curtis, co-curator of *Epic Iran* said: “Visitors will be astonished by the quality and variety of objects from Ancient Iran, showing that it had a civilisation every bit as advanced and prosperous as those in neighbouring Mesopotamia and Egypt. It will be clear that the Persian Empire, founded in 550 BC, inherited a very rich legacy from earlier periods of Iranian history.”

The fifth section, **The Book of Kings**, is a prelude to the sections devoted to Islamic Iran. It shows how Iran’s long history before the coming of Islam was understood in later centuries – primarily through the *Shahnameh*, or *Book of Kings*, which is the world’s greatest epic poem, completed by the poet Firdowsi around AD 1010. Combining myth, legend, and history, the *Shahnameh* provides a widely honoured and therefore powerful version of events, rooting Iran’s long history in the minds of its people. *Epic Iran* will feature a series of elaborate illustrated manuscripts and folios depicting scenes from the *Shahnameh*, loaned to the exhibition from The Sarikhani Collection and British Library among others.

Change of Faith will explore the place of Islam in Iranian culture in the millennium and more that followed the Arab conquest in the mid-seventh century AD. The section introduces the Holy Qur’an – the text in Arabic that forms the basis of Islam – as well as the role of the Arabic language in Iran after the conquest. Arabic became the common language of intellectual life in the country, while the art of calligraphy in the Arabic script became highly developed and an important element in Iranian design. The section will also explore how conversion to Islam gave Iranians a new understanding of history focused on the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors. Disputes over the events of this period lie at the heart of the split between Sunnis and Shi’ites, and they took on great significance from the early 1500s, when the Imami form of Shi’ism became the country’s official religion. A number of exquisite Qur’ans and manuscript illuminations will feature, alongside a prayer rug, battle and parade armour, a celestial globe, and the magnificent Horoscope of Iskandar Sultan, on loan from the Wellcome Collection.

Charting the rise of Persian poetry, **Literary Excellence** will reveal how – from the tenth century AD – Persian written in the Arabic script emerged as a literary language in the royal courts of eastern Iran. Royal patronage meant manuscripts were incredibly refined and poetry became part of the visual arts because of the use of poetic inscriptions, which appeared on items including ceramics, metalwork, and even carpets. The V&A’s Salting Carpet includes verses by Hafiz in its border, whilst a bottle and bowl from the 12th century, decorated in lustre pigments, feature poetry in Persian. Much was also written in praise of rulers, with poetry finding its visual counterparts in art representing royal power.

Featuring rich material from the thirteenth century AD onwards, **Royal Patronage** will demonstrate how Iranian traditions of kingship were reborn after Islam, with the return of royal customs like robes of honour, the creation of lavish art and architecture, and an insight into internationalism as a two-way exchange. Recreating the splendour of Isfahan, three ten-metre-long paintings that replicate tilework patterns from the city’s domes will be suspended in arcs from the ceiling to suggest a dome interior. These will be displayed alongside an AV projection that uses the paintings to re-construct the appearance of the full dome. Technical architectural drawings from the nineteenth century and a selection of tiles will complement the paintings, and the section will look at how Iran took on influences from the wider world – from China and Europe in particular – as is apparent, for example, from the

development of blue-and-white ceramics. Important Iranian objects that have been in Britain for three centuries will also feature, including the Buccleuch Sanguszko Carpet and two oil paintings loaned by Her Majesty The Queen from the Royal Collection.

The Old and the New will explore how the Qajar dynasty looked back to their predecessors to legitimise their power, whilst also seeking to modernise and scope out new relationships with Europe. The introduction of photography in Iran in the mid-1800s had a profound effect on the way Iranians represented themselves. Fashion will also feature, juxtaposing a full outfit, a short skirt likely influenced by European ballet tutus, and watercolour paintings of Iranian women made for tourists visiting the country. The final part of the section will look at how Iranian craftsmen sought new markets for their skills in the 1880s, when their new clientèle included the V&A itself.

Tim Stanley, co-curator of *Epic Iran* said: *“This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to look at Iran as a single civilisation over 5,000 years. Objects and expertise have come together to tell one of the world’s great stories in art, design and culture. In the Islamic period, political power in Iran was re-cast in many different forms, but an overarching sense of history and a deep devotion to Persian literature survived the turmoil of events. In 1501 the Imami form of Shi’ism became Iran’s official religion, giving the population a unifying set of beliefs that set them apart from their neighbours. Shared beliefs, memories of a glorious past and a joy in Persian poetry are still a vital part of life in Iran today.”*

Bridging the 1940s to the present day, the final section **Modern and Contemporary Iran** will cover a period of dynamic social and political change in Iran, encompassing increased international travel as well as political dissent, the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Works by Sirak Melkonian, Parviz Tanavoli, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, and Bahman Mohasses will showcase the mid-century explosion of artistic modernisms, brought to a dramatic end with the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq War. The cultural scene flourished again in the 1990s under the mercantilism of Rafsanjani and liberalism of Khatami, and modern technology means Iranian contemporary art exists in a world without boundaries. Today, Iran has an evolving, self-renewing culture: some works are informed by past traditions, and many are radical and experimental both in medium and expression. Gender, politics, religion and identity issues are frequently multi-layered and often approached with humour and irony, testing the boundaries of censorship and control. *Epic Iran* will feature work by Iranian artists living in Iran as well as based overseas, with works by Farhad Moshiri, Avish Khebrezadeh, Ali Banisadr, Shadi Ghadirian, Hossein Valamanesh, Shirin Neshat, Shirin Aliabadi, Shirazeh Houshiary and Y Z Kami.

Ina Sarikhani Sandmann, Associate Curator of *Epic Iran* said: *“Contemporary Iranian art is dynamic and exciting, critically self-examining and engaged in the global world, and both intellectual and playful. The rich variety and quality, often radical and experimental and unapologetic in playing with themes such as gender, politics and religion, may surprise visitors – and helps explain why Iran’s long legacy of culture continues to be so relevant to the world today.”*

- ENDS -

For further PRESS information about *Epic Iran* please contact Sophie Steel on s.steel@vam.ac.uk/ +44 (0)20 7942 2279 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk

Notes to Editors

- *Epic Iran* runs from 13 February – 30 August 2021.
- Advance tickets are £18, concessions from £15. Tickets are available at vam.ac.uk/epiciran
- The *Epic Iran* curatorial team consists of Tim Stanley and Dr John Curtis OBE FBA as Co-Curators; Ina Sarikhani Sandmann as Associate Curator; Sarah Piram as V&A Project Curator; Alexandra Magub as V&A Project Assistant; and Astrid Johansen as Cultural Heritage Manager, Iran Heritage Foundation.
- The exhibition design is by Gort Scott Architects.
- The exhibition will be accompanied by a new V&A publication, *Epic Iran: 5000 Years of Culture*, by John Curtis, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann and Tim Stanley. RRP £40.
- *Epic Iran* is organised by the V&A with the Iran Heritage Foundation in association with The Sarikhani Collection.

About the V&A and the art of Iran

The V&A has been collecting the art of Iran since the museum's founding over 150 years ago and has one of the world's leading collections from the medieval and modern periods. By the 1890s, this impressive collection ranged from glazed ceramics, metalwork and glass, to paintings, textiles and carpets, and included the remarkable Ardabil Carpet, now on permanent display in the Jameel Gallery.

A new phase for the V&A's Iran collections began in the 2000s. New displays of Iranian material feature in the Jameel Gallery (opened in 2006) and in the Ceramics Galleries (opened in 2009–10), and in 2009 the curatorial team was augmented by the creation of a curatorial post dedicated to the Iranian collection and supported by the Iran Heritage Foundation. In the same year the museum saw the Iranian American artist Afroz Amighi win the first Jameel Prize, a contemporary art prize for work that engages with Middle Eastern design traditions. The long relationship between the V&A and the history of Iranian art continues to inspire today, with *Epic Iran* being the next high point in this rapidly developing programme.

About the Iran Heritage Foundation

The Iran Heritage Foundation is an independent, non-political, registered UK charity that was set up in 1990 with the mission to promote the cultural heritage of Iran and the Persianate world through partnerships with universities and museums, organising and sponsoring exhibitions, arranging lectures and seminars, and publishing books. It is funded by voluntary donations and has no connections with any governmental or official bodies.

Exhibitions organised or sponsored by IHF have included *Royal Persian Paintings: the Qajar Epoch 1785-1925* at the Brunei Gallery in SOAS in 1999, *Iranian Contemporary Art* at the Barbican Centre in 2001, *Forgotten Empire: the World of Ancient Persia* at the British Museum in 2005-6 and *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, also at the British Museum in 2009. More recently, in 2013, the IHF initiated and organised a 5-city tour in the United States of the famous Cyrus Cylinder and the Oxus Treasure, on loan from the British Museum, for a travelling exhibition which highlighted the richness of the Persian Empire to the American public. Recent projects have included a series of international seminars on Tepe Sialk in Iran, arguably one of the most important archaeological sites in the Ancient Near East, and a resulting

publication. IHF has also recently taken over Persian Language Online, a website platform dedicated to teaching the Persian language.

IHF has had a fruitful and longstanding association with the V&A, having organised a season of events and installations around the work of the Iranian artist Abbas Kiarostami in 2005, and also having supported an IHF Curator of the Iranian Collection at the V&A since 2009.

About The Sarikhani Collection

The Sarikhani Collection is a body of 1,000 works of art from Iran housed in its own private museum. In addition to managing its own curatorial activities, the collection promotes research in the culture and arts of Iran, including loans, exhibitions, research projects, publications, translations and philanthropy. The collection has most recently launched *Ceramics of Iran* by Oliver Watson. Firmly believing in the importance and power of collaborative partnerships, The Sarikhani Collection has developed close relationships with several institutions, both museums and universities, including The Ashmolean in Oxford, The Pergamon Museum in Berlin, St Andrew's University and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The collection is currently planning two major exhibitions on art from Iran: *Epic Iran* opening at the V&A in February 2021 and a solo exhibition at the James Simon Gallery on the museum island in Berlin, in October 2021.

About Cockayne – Grants for the Arts, a donor-advised fund of The London Community Foundation

Cockayne is a private arts foundation based in San Francisco. It supports diverse and groundbreaking arts projects in the performing, literary and visual arts in London through a donor advised programme, Cockayne – Grants for the Arts, held at the London Community Foundation.

About Darioush Winery

Darioush Winery, the Napa Valley estate acclaimed for producing Bordeaux-inspired wines with character, concentration and finesse, is a pioneer in modern hospitality and a destination like no other. Founded in 1997 by Iranian-immigrant Darioush Khaledi, the eponymous winery is infused with Persian heritage and offers unique discoveries in art, culture, and wine appreciation.

| www.darioush.com

About The Ruddock Foundation for the Arts

The Ruddock Foundation is a grant making body that primarily supports museums with their exhibition and acquisition funding as well as research and capital projects. It also supports non-profit theatres and education.

About The Soudavar Memorial Foundation

Founded by a family with a long history of philanthropy, The Soudavar Memorial Foundation was formally established in 2001 and follows on the lifelong commitment to the arts, culture and heritage of Iran by Fereidoun Soudavar (1908-1997) and his wife, Massoumeh Amir-Alai. Established in London since before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, they were amongst the first Iranian expatriates to commit themselves to the preservation of the long tradition of Persian studies internationally. The Soudavar Memorial Foundation's mission is to preserve and promote the rich and diverse cultural and artistic heritage of the Greater Iranian world in all its diverse aspects, with a particular emphasis on continuities, areas of neglect, and on interaction with other cultures.

With thanks to:



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