

LOUVRE

Press release

Exhibition

October 5, 2007 -
January 7, 2008



The Song of the World Art of Safavid Iran (1501–1736)

This exhibition is made possible thanks to the generous support of Total



The visual arts are intertwined with the written word in Iranian culture, whose single greatest theme is the beauty of the world as a divine creation. This intimate connection, as apparent in painting as it is in the decorative arts, where the motifs employed visualize literary metaphors, reached its zenith during the Safavid era (1501–1736). Conceived as an anthology of remarkable works of art, several of which have never been on public view before, this exhibition and its accompanying catalogue focus for the very first time on this fundamental aspect of what we would today describe as a conceptual art, dominated by symbolism. Iranian art, which is often misunderstood, may give the impression of having no purpose beyond mere decoration. Quite to the contrary, all of its details are steeped in meaning and the key to their interpretation is to be found in Persian literature.

Evidence of the pre-Islamic past is pervasive in this ancient culture, four millennia in the making. In manuscript painting, figures from Iranian antiquity as well as those of the Old Testament are represented in Islamic guise. The past thus becomes a metaphor for the present, as demonstrated by the titles ascribed to rulers in panegyric odes, which abound with references to the “Second Rostam” or the “Second Alexander”. The literature and art of Iran were both admired and imitated from Ottoman Turkey to Mughal India. This exhibition presents several little-known examples of these works inspired by the creations of Iranian artists.

This exhibition is organized by the Louvre and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux.

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The exhibition’s media partners are the television channel Histoire and the Europe 1 radio network



Exhibition curator: Assadulah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, research director emeritus at the CNRS, is an historian of Iranian culture. He is the author of several books and many monographs on the art of the Iranian sphere of cultural influence: Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, from Bukhara to Samarkand.

This event is a result of the scientific and cultural cooperation agreement signed in November 2004 between the Louvre and the Iranian Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization (ICHTO).

Left: Page from the manuscript of the *Shah-nameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp: A traveler from a caravan catches a glimpse of Zal, who is being raised by the magical Simorgh in its aerie. Tabriz, Iran, 1524–1539. Image courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., The Art and History Collection, inv. LTS 95.2.46
© Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
Right: *Bird in the Garden of Angels*, Iran, dated 897 / November 4, 1491–October 22, 1492. Musée National de Céramique, Sèvres, MNC 22687
© RMN / Martine Beck-Coppola



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This exhibition presents nearly 200 pieces from national and private collections. Thanks to exceptional loans from Iranian museums, including the Golestan Library and the Isfahan Museum, as well as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Russian and Swedish institutions, the Al-Sabah Collection of Kuwait and the Aga Khan Collection, the development of Iranian art under the Safavid dynasty is stunningly brought to life. Among the works of art illustrating the heights attained by this art during the reigns of Shah Ismail (1501–1524) and Shah Tahmasp I (1524–1576) are rare painted manuscripts, including several pages from the *Shah-nameh* (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp I, the most important manuscript of its time, today dispersed across a number of collections. Many other royal manuscripts, delicate and brightly colored, as well as drawings grouped in albums, also illustrate the concepts and the faith embodied in Persian literature. Several banquet tableware pieces were chosen due to their spectacular beauty as well as the technical prowess displayed: large ceramic platters decorated with flowers, small monochrome goblets, bronze objects. A number of very rare textiles are presented, including two “speaking tree” rugs from Lisbon and Cincinnati, an area of study that has been given new impetus thanks to this exhibition. Splendid bound manuscripts, as well as a few objects from the everyday lives of courtiers or scholars, such as a unique pen case, round out this unprecedented celebration of the beauty of Safavid art, whose influence extended from Persian-speaking lands eastward as far as Hindustan.

The design of the exhibition was created by Adrien Gardère, who is currently at work on the re-installation of the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. He sought to evoke the perspectives, lines and motifs of Islamic architecture. Manuscript pages are suspended from light-colored rails, while large platforms holding objects direct the visitor’s gaze to the projections of images filmed for the Louvre in Isfahan in the spring of 2007.

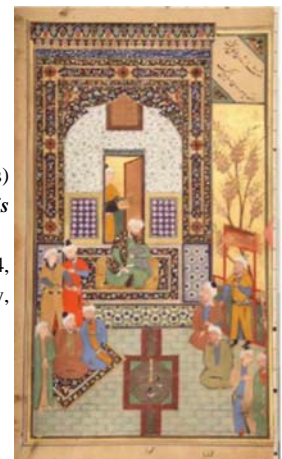


Left: *Plate (qab) created for the court.*

Isfahan, Western Iran, dated (1)109 / July 20, 1697–July 9, 1698, British Museum, inv. 1896,0626.5 © London, the Trustees of the British Museum

Right: Page from the *Bustan* (Garden of Scented Flowers) by Sa’adi. *The king of Syria receives two dervishes at his palace.*

Copied in 961 / December 7, 1533–November 25, 1554, Golestan Library, Tehran, inv. 2197 © Golestan Library, Tehran / Photo by Ebrahim Khadem



Publications:

Catalogue, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Somogy, 469 pages, 440 illustrations, about €45.

The publication of this work was sponsored by Arjo Wiggins.

This exhibition and the catalogue are both made possible thanks to the generous support of Total.

Album, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Somogy, €8.

In the Auditorium du Louvre:

- **A series of four conferences on Mondays at 6:30 p.m., October 1, 8, 15 and 22.**

The conference on Monday, October 1 will be followed by a screening of the 2007 film *The Royal Mosque of Isfahan*, co-produced by the Louvre/Les Films d’Ici and ARTE France, “Architectures” series

- two other **art films** will be shown on Monday, October 8 at 12:30 p.m.

- **Art on Stage**, Friday, December 14 at 12:30 p.m.: “Kayumars and his courtyard of paradise”, by Souren Melikian, a page from one of the most beautiful Persian painted manuscripts ever produced, the *Shah-nameh* of Shah Tahmasp I.

Open daily except Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and until 10 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays.

Admission fees: Song of the World exhibition only: €0.50. Permanent collections + Song of the World exhibition: €3 before 6 p.m., €1 after 6 p.m. Free admission for youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the “Louvre Jeunes”, “Louvre Professionnels”, “Louvre Enseignants”, “Louvre Etudiants Partenaires” or “Amis du Louvre” cards.

During the same period at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs: *Pure Decoration? Masterpieces of Islamic Art at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs* (October 11, 2007–January 13, 2008) presents the collection of Islamic art held by the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and its influence on applied arts at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.