

DISPLAYING IRAN IN BERLIN: OBSERVATIONS ON (MISSED?) OPPORTUNITIES IN CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical review of the exhibition *Iran: Five Millennia of Art and Culture*, held at Berlin's James-Simon-Galerie between December 2021 and March 2022. While its galleries provided a beautiful, respectful, and highly educational overview of the wider development of Persian material culture, the exhibition ultimately failed to deliver what was promised by its title, misleadingly conceptualising Iranian art and culture as unimportant after the mid-eighteenth century. Instead of taking advantage of the prestigious institutional network into which the exhibition was embedded in order to highlight the extraordinary level of resilience inherent in contemporary Iranian cultural production, *Iran* played into an unfavourable conceptualisation of a past golden age transitioning into an unilluminated present. This is particularly regretful in light of current global tendencies to define and assess Iranian cultural heritage and aspects of Iranian identity primarily on the basis of geopolitical arguments.

KEYWORDS: Iran, Persia, Germany, Berlin, exhibition, museum, archaeology, art history, review.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Franziska completed the MA programme in History of Art and Archaeology at SOAS in 2022. Her final project focused on an early Qur'an manuscript and its production environment. She has also developed a strong academic interest in provenance research in the contexts of both colonialism and the German national-socialist regime.

N.B.: All centuries and dates correspond to the Gregorian calendar unless otherwise specified.

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OPPORTUNITIES

The year 2021 witnessed two blockbuster exhibitions focusing on the material culture of Iran. In May, London's Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) opened *Epic Iran: 5000 Years of Culture*, curated by Tim Stanley, John Curtis, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann, and Sarah Piram. Shortly after, the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin at the James-Simon-Galerie presented *Iran: Five Millennia of Art and Culture* (Fig. 1), curated by Ute Franke, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann, and Stefan Weber. My article critically reviews the Berlin edition with references to London for validation of observations. While *Iran's* relevance and timeliness in both educational and political contexts cannot be emphasised enough, its selective omission of post-eighteenth century cultural production ultimately undermined the curatorial attempt to present an alternative to contemporary geopolitically-focused interpretations of Iran's past and present.

Seeking to present a survey of Persian material culture from early civilisations until the present day, both museums placed objects from their respective permanent collections in dialogue with works from the private Britain-based Sarikhani Collection. Galleries juxtaposed different materials (textiles, works on paper, wood, ceramics, stonework, metalwork, glass, leather, stucco, ivory, painting on canvas, fibreglass) with background text wall panels and looping videos on relevant topics (Fig. 2), inviting visitors to travel along chronological pathways: London's earliest displayed objects were Proto-Elamite clay tables dating to 3200-2900 BCE; its most recent ones works by Sahand Hesamiyan and Avish Khebrezadeh from 2016. Similarly, Berlin's introductory panels situated Iran in world geography, followed by galleries dedicated to empires from 1800 BCE onwards. Starting from Elam and contemporary kingdoms, *Iran* presented the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian empires, the Arab conquests, the Seljuks, the arrival of the Mongols and Timurids, the Safavid era, two Qajar paintings, and its closing piece: Parviz Tanavoli's 2006 sculpture *Heech*.

Museum audiences experience and understand objects based on varying levels of pre-existing knowledge. For the non-specialist visitor, gallery references provide a paramount layer of meaning. Several approaches are available to curators for transferring knowledge into this public space. Historically, however, these have mainly used the isolated object as a point of departure of exhibition anatomy.¹ A decade ago, Stefan Weber, director of Berlin's Museum

¹ For example: Detlef Hoffmann, "The German Art Museum and the History of the Nation," in *Museum Cultures: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed. Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3-21; Malcolm Baker, "Bode and Museum Display: The Arrangement of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum and the South Kensington Response," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 38 (1996): 143-153,

for Islamic Art, questioned “whether the formulation of objectives vis-à-vis the audience has ever been the starting point used to structure the exhibition unit.”² Here, *Iran* aimed to deliver. Within chronology, the exhibition focused on links to the public’s contemporary realities as a conceptual starting point. For example, a section on Kashan ceramics featured a video of Kashani artist Abbas Akbari presenting the lustre ceramics manufacturing processes. The popularity of short films as tools connecting Iran’s cultural heritage to the audience’s twenty-first century experiences was evidenced by the fact that visitors would constantly congregate around the screens. This contextual approach was further underscored by tours for school children, and an online public lecture series on aspects of Persian culture in English and German.

Moreover, chronological progression constituted an ordering system easily appreciated by audiences of varying demographic backgrounds. Visitors lacking an a priori understanding of Iranian history’s periodisation came away with exactly this, conveyed through comprehensively structured and clearly designed text panels. The texts themselves skillfully highlighted temporal and geographical links between eras while not overloading on information. In this sense, the exhibition monumentally contributed to the museum’s educational and academic agenda at a moment in time when the world’s perception of Iran is increasingly being dominated by geopolitical concerns.

Iran’s primary shortcoming may be identified in its treatment of pre- vs. post-Safavid (1501-1736) material production, both in the catalogue and the exhibition itself. Limited space was offered to the three hundred years between the Safavid empire’s demise and the dawn of the twenty-first century. The only post-eighteenth century works included were two Qajar linen paintings and a red fibreglass edition of Tanavoli’s *Heech* series. The Qajar works were hung at the back of the Safavid space, while *Heech* was awkwardly squeezed into the exit hallway, adjacent to the final credits (Fig. 3). Unlike the previous galleries, no panels explained the works’ temporal or geo-political context, except for brief object labels and the words *Epilogue* and *1796-today*.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/4125967>; For a history of collection, exhibition, and communication of Islamic art in the context of Berlin’s Museum for Islamic Art: Jens, Kröger, “Early Islamic Art History in Germany and Concepts of Object and Exhibition,” in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, eds., Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, and Stefan Weber (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 173-183; For a historiography of the academic discipline of Islamic art in the West: Nasser Rabbat, “Islamic Arts at a Crossroads?” in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, eds., Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, and Stefan Weber (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 76-83.

² Stefan Weber, “A Concert of Things: Thoughts on Objects of Islamic Art in the Museum Context,” in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, eds., Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, and Stefan Weber (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 34.

The museum proudly received *Heech* in 2020, a purchase widely communicated via its website and social media channels. A worthy and important piece of Iranian heritage in Berlin's collection, the sculpture could not have been excluded. But in the absence of explanations situating it within the overall curatorial concept or Tanavoli's embeddedness within Iranian cultural history,³ this abrupt switch from a contextual to an aesthetic approach highlighting a single masterpiece, was puzzling. We might thus suppose that the reason for inclusion was pride of ownership rather than a critically evaluated curatorial strategy. This confusion was not helped by its label, which explained that "[t]his modern Iranian art-form bridges the gap between European-style modernism and American pop art" but failed to expound how the work achieves said bridging, not to mention why Iranian art should aim to traverse a European-American gap in the first place. The label thus not only raised questions regarding terminology, but also trapped Tanavoli in an exclusively Western system of reference.

Similarly, while the Qajar regency catastrophically impacted Iranian economy and politics, the Qajars nevertheless represented prominent patrons of the arts. Reducing Qajar artistic production to two similar paintings positioned in an unfavourable location, evoked a sense of disorientation. In parallel with the display of Tanavoli's work, tensions between reluctance and a responsibility to include works for the sake of comprehensiveness hung heavily in the space.

What could be the reasons for assigning such an invisible role to the material culture of post-1736 Iran? I was able to pose this question directly to Ina Sarikhani Sandmann and Stefan Weber in a public webinar titled *Modern Art in Iran*. It provided an extensive overview of Iranian art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—without concern for why these obviously important periods had been excluded from the exhibition itself. The response to my question: the Sarikhani Collection does not collect post-eighteenth century works.⁴

Justifying the premature end of the display of Iranian art and culture in Berlin as depending on the Sarikhani Collection's temporal focus may be challenged, considering London's ability to follow artistic production into the twenty-first century. The London

³ For example: Kamran Diba, "Iran," in *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, ed. Wijdan Ali (London: Scorpion Publishing, 1989), 150-158; Hamid Keshmirshekan, "The National School of Art and the Obsession with Identity and Cultural Concerns: *Saqqa-khaneh*, a neo-Traditional Movement," in *Contemporary Iranian Art, New Perspectives* (London: Saqi Books, 2013), 93-128; Hamid Keshmirshekan, "Neo-traditionalism and Modern Iranian Painting," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2005): 607-630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860500338408>; Hamid Keshmirshekan, "Contemporary Iranian Art: The Emergence of New Artistic Discourses," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 3 (2007): 335-366, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860701390448>; Fereshteh Daftari, *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

⁴ Public webinar. 24 February, 2022. Accessed via a link sent to my private email account.

catalogue features essays both on the Qajars and modern and contemporary Iranian art. Yet the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries remain elusive in Berlin's catalogue, which concludes with a discussion of Safavid Isfahan. Here, the Qajar paintings appear only on the final page list of exhibited works, long after scholarly comments have closed. Tanavoli's sculpture, printed without context on the final page, is identified in the general list of artworks, but the corresponding entry number cannot be found anywhere near the actual image. As in the exhibition, post-Safavid works appear as unconnected afterthoughts, their significance inaccessible and lost to the non-specialist reader.

My argument does not simply criticise the shortening of *Five Millennia of Art and Culture* by several centuries. More importantly, I contend that this omission has negative implications for the construction of meaning within the public space, and therefore should have been proactively addressed by exhibition texts. The reasons why no relevant modern and contemporary works could be sourced should have been clearly stated to visitors as a preemptive mechanism to avoid potential misunderstandings, explaining the absence of post-eighteenth century cultural production with underlying institutional constraints rather than leaving it open to speculation. This would have provided a more balanced and comprehensive contextual understanding. As the Sarikhani Collection could not contribute any post-Safavid objects, London's curators secured loans externally. This was not the case in Berlin. As demonstrated by the webinar and catalogues, the omission could not have been due to a lack of expertise. Neither could it have resulted from missing resources for relevant loan enquiries, as Berlin is linked to figures with significant clout in the contemporary Iranian visual arts scene.

Judging from the slightly surprised reactions to my webinar question, the omission—and Heech's simplistic definition—was not based on curatorial intent. Rather, it seems implications had not been carefully considered. Relegating three hundred years of dynamic and diverse art production, which in many ways has been a catalyst for political and cultural transitions, to a negligible *Epilogue* status thus constitutes a missed opportunity at best. At worst, it casts a misleading light onto the Iranian artistic scene and its contribution to global resilience. Instead of offering a new sense of meaning and knowledge, it leaves visitors with an obscure idea of post-eighteenth century Iran, thereby indirectly reinforcing the widely—and incorrectly—propagated idea of Iran as a place of stagnant contemporary culture, cut off from other geographies of production. This situation appears particularly tragic in light of the exhibition's aim to anchor its relevance in contemporary realities.⁵

⁵ "Iran: Five Millennia of Art and Culture," *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/iran-five-millennia-of-art-and-culture/>.

At several points throughout history, Iran found itself facing the opposing forces of tradition and modernity. This became particularly apparent in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a cataclysmic event that burnt into the memory of many and prompted the Sarikhani family's migration to Britain. Resilience has thus been woven into the Sarikhanis' experiences, as it has been demanded of many Iranians. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Iranians have had to continuously readjust their personal and public lives, developing and redeveloping strategies for navigating uncertainties and preparing for contingencies, be it in political, economic, or social realms. Although neither exhibition remains open at the time of this article's publication, recent developments underscore the acute relevance of *Iran's* missed opportunity. In light of a drastic turn of political climate since September 2022, the Iranian people continue to demonstrate high levels of resilience. Cultural production persistently feeds into the strengthening of resilience reservoirs, on which communities may fall back in times of crisis. As a time-transcending process, its importance should not be epochally limited.

The role of visual arts in identity creation, fostering perseverance, and enhancing recovery in light of discouragement, cannot be underestimated. Cultural production by Iranians domestically and in diaspora demonstrates a shared awareness of both the country's ancient heritage and recent turmoils. In current times of crisis and division it also creates messages of universal reverberation. Iranian material culture has evolved along a continuum into the twenty-first century, turning challenges into opportunities with patience, humour, and a strong sense of purpose. Works of twentieth and twenty-first century artists displayed in London were rich in social and political critique. Across a wide range of media, they reflected thoughts on transcultural anxieties, otherness, the relationship between memory and identity, or the commercialisation of experiences. Picking an isolated token piece to represent the complexities of modern and contemporary Iranian cultural production, as was the case in Berlin, thus constitutes a controversial choice, one whose politics need to be made transparent to visitors if they are to grasp the nuances of Iran's pluralities and the exhibition's full resonance in our globally interlinked society.

Iran: Five Millennia of Art and Culture, then, initially demonstrated a conscious commitment to the non-specialist visitor as its display strategy's fundamental point of departure, but did not achieve what it set out to do in its title. Explaining this shortcoming upon inquiry instead of proactively tackling it within the exhibition itself cannot be a strategy fit for current socio-political contexts, which are highly sensitised to cultural rifts and populist divides.

Finally, education is an important objective for Berlin's Museum for Islamic Art—gallery access has been made increasingly affordable, and public programming has continuously been expanded. At the same time, the museum has grown its collection of contemporary art. Eventually, and especially in light of the ongoing remodelling process, which will significantly expand the museum's permanent display capacity, it will need to question the positioning of modern and contemporary works—a process eluding straightforward answers. Should these works be situated as global, national, ethnic, or regional? How do they connect to what has come before? While *Iran* certainly succeeded in guiding the general public towards a greater understanding of the region's remarkably diverse heritage, involuntarily, the exhibition highlighted the challenges implicit in such queries.

APPENDIX A: EXHIBITIONS DISCUSSED

Iran: Five Millennia of Art and Culture

Curated by Ute Franke, Stefan Weber, and Ina Sarikhani Sandmann

James-Simon-Galerie, Pergamonmuseum, Berlin

December 2021 - March 2022

Catalogue:

Franke, Ute, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann, and Stefan Weber (eds). *Iran: Five Millennia of Art and Culture*. Munich: Hirmer, 2021.

Epic Iran: 5000 Years of Culture

Curated by John Curtis, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann and Tim Stanley

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

May - September 2021

Catalogue:

Curtis, John, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann, and Tim Stanely (eds). *Epic Iran: 5000 Years of Culture*. London: V&A Publishing, 2021.

APPENDIX B: ILLUSTRATIONS

All photos taken by the author.



Figure 1: Entrance to the James-Simon-Galerie, Berlin.



Figure 2: Impressions of the galleries, Berlin.



Figure 3: Positioning of the *Heech* sculpture and the two Qajar works, Berlin.



Figure 4: Parviz Tanavoli's sculpture next to the exit (the photographer is standing in the exit). If visitors paused in front of the work, others would have trouble passing by them towards the exit.



Figure 5: Qajar works, positioned on the backside of the Safavid gallery space.



Figure 6: The only wall text covering post-Safavid Iran.

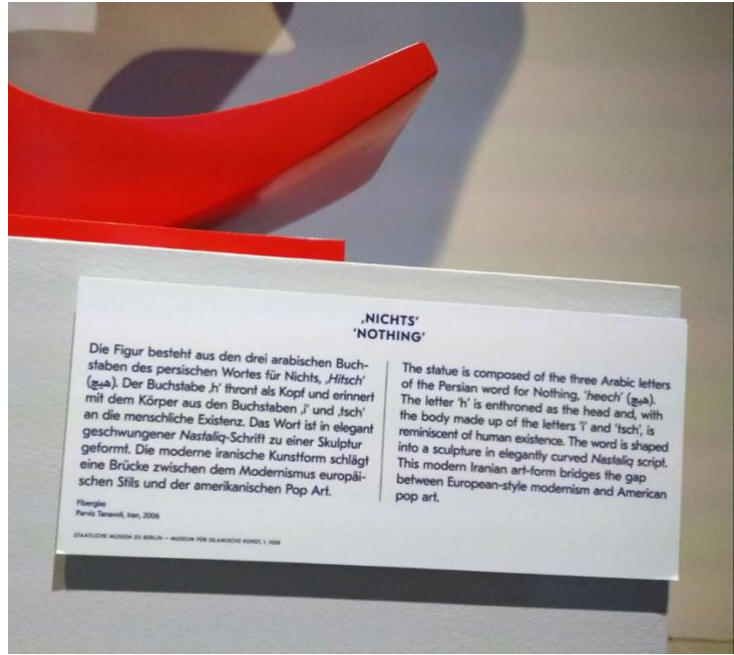


Figure 7: Close-up of *Heech* and its label at the exit of Berlin’s *Iran* exhibition

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