

# ایرانی زمین

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

**CURATING PERSIAN ARTS  
IN THE 21ST CENTURY:  
CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES**

POWERHOUSE ULTIMO  
JULY 30TH, 2021

Convenor: Prof Pedram Khosronejad,  
Curator of Persian Arts, Powerhouse Ultimo

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This research symposium brings together international curators, scholars and museum professionals to discuss the challenges and future direction of contemporary curatorial practice in the field of Persian arts and crafts. Coinciding with Iranzamin – the first survey exhibition to showcase Persian arts and crafts from the Powerhouse – the symposium will explore this field of research by leading experts in Australia and beyond and includes a curator-led tour of the exhibition.

Speakers include Prof Christian Gruber (Chair, History of Art, University of Michigan, USA, and world-renowned scholar in the field of Islamic art and material culture), Dr Michael Chagnon (Curator, Aga Khan Museum, Canada, and an art historian specialising in the Persianate world), Dr Mahroo Moosavi (Lecturer, University of Sydney and an historian specialising in Persian arts and architecture) and Prof Pedram Khosronejad, Curator, Persian Arts, Powerhouse Ultimo.



## Curating Persian Art in the 21st Century: Transforming Challenge

Michael Chagnon

### Abstract

How do recent shifts in academic art history and in museum practice and purview inflect curatorial approaches to Persian art in the twenty-first century? This paper addresses the opportunities for innovation that current orientations in the field offer for the display and interpretation of the arts of the Persianate sphere. Challenges for curating art in traditional media – such as illustrated manuscripts and three-dimensional “crafts” such as ceramics and metalwork – will be discussed in the context of broader issues surrounding cultural representation and decentered art histories. The paper will then turn to two exhibitions at the Aga Khan Museum – *Remastered* (2020-21) and *Code of the Lion* (2023) – as case studies for engaging 21st Century audiences in the technical, aesthetic, and conceptual significance of the arts of the Perso-Islamic sphere, linking cultural specificity to global relevance.

### Biography

Michael Chagnon is a curator at the Aga Khan Museum and Assistant Professor (Status Only) in the Department of Art History at the University of Toronto. A specialist in painting and the arts of the book from the Persianate sphere, Dr. Chagnon curated the AKM’s current special exhibition *Remastered* which uses digitally interactive technologies to explore the theme of human connectivity in the Museum’s masterpieces of Persian, Turkish, and Mughal Indian manuscript illustration. He has held previous curatorial posts at the Brooklyn Museum, LACMA, and Japan Society (New York), while his substantial teaching experience includes a five-week online course on *Word and Image in Islamic Art* through the Aga Khan Museum; a graduate seminar on *Critical Approaches to Persianate Painting* at Columbia University (Spring 2019); and a master-class series on *Islamic manuscripts* at the New York Public Library (2018). His current research focuses on intertextuality and intervisuality in early modern Persianate art, the subject of book project. Dr. Chagnon received his Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University in 2015.



## ***Wellspring of the Arts:* Iranzamin and Persianate Arts Across the Centuries**

Christiane Gruber

### **Abstract**

The unofficial national anthem of Iran, whose lyrics were penned in 1944, refers to Persian lands as filled with gems and its soil as a “wellspring of the arts” (*sarchasma-yi hunar*). And indeed, for centuries the arts of *Iranzamin* – meaning the “Land of Iran” – have yielded rich and diverse artistic traditions that have not been contained to one geographical area or cultural location. Rather, they have crafted a sense of community and belonging across vast swathes of land, stretching from premodern Eurasia to contemporary Australia. Increasingly untethered from a continent or even religion (*din*), state (*dawlat*) or nation (*millat*), the arts of *Iranzamin* bear open-ended echoes of Iranian culture stretching back to pre-Islamic and Islamic times. In addition, Persianate arts draw upon a deep reservoir of artistic practices and references while concurrently propelling innovations in technology and media. Such entanglements kindle a sense of connectedness and belonging across the globe, of productive imbrications that strip away at overly tight taxonomies and categories thereby capturing the dynamic mobility of material objects and their human makers across both time and space.

### **Biography**

Christiane Gruber is Professor and Chair in the History of Art Department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; President-Elect of the Historians of Islamic Art Association; and Founding Director of Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online. Her fields of interest include Islamic ascension texts and images, depictions of the Prophet Muhammad, Persianate book arts, amulets and talismans, architecture, and visual and material culture from the medieval period to today. Her latest publications are her third monograph *The Praiseworthy One: The Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images* (2019) and her edited volume *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World* (2019).



## ***Iranzamin* Curatorial: Towards A New Form of Cultural Encounter**

Pedram Khosronejad

### **Abstract**

The curator of *Iranzamin* will discuss the strategies he used in the design and installation of the exhibition inspired by his work as an anthropologist-curator that have led to the development of new socio-cultural ideas and insights. He will discuss how the elision and elusion of the definition of a curatorial view of cultural anthropology has opened up the practice of curating Persian arts for interrogation. The curatorial premise of *Iranzamin* operates at a very different level: it explores all that takes place in the exhibition space resulting in action and engagement by visitors and new ways in which to view the exhibition as a milieu of knowledge, education and healing. This represents a shift away from the staging of an exhibition to the exhibition itself as a site of enactment, dramatisation and performance.

### **Biography**

Professor Pedram Khosronejad is the Curator of Persian Arts at the Powerhouse museum, Sydney, an Adjunct Professor in the Religion and Society Research Cluster at Western Sydney University and a Fellow of the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University. Prior to these positions, he worked as the Associate Director of Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies at Oklahoma State University in the United States (2015-2019) and as the Goli Rais Larizadeh Chair of the Iran Heritage Foundation for the Anthropology of Iran in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland (2007-2015). Professor Khosronejad is well-known internationally for his innovative visual anthropology research project on Photography of African Slavery in Qajar-era Iran (1850-1925). Since August 2019, Prof. Khosronejad has been working on a groundbreaking interdisciplinary research project regarding the German civilian expatriates of Persia (Iran), Australians who had been detained with their parents in Iran in 1941 after the country's invasion by the British and Soviet armies during the Second World War. He is founder editor of the *Anthropology of the Contemporary Middle East and Central Eurasia* (ACME).



## **Text as Cognitive-Emotive Intervention: New Approaches to the Concept of Persian Art**

Mahroo Mousavi

### **Abstract**

This paper questions the inherited discourses of the concept of Persian art by working between literary and artistic productions. It suggests an alternate discourse for Persian art history in which the inscriptional text operates as an ‘interventional’ strategy adopted by the patron or the artist rather than a concomitant – and in some cases purely scientific – component of the object’s visual or other sensorial language. The abundant use of text, especially Persian poetry in the artistic productions of Persianate societies from the Timurid period (1370-1506 AD) onwards has raised questions about proper lenses through which the scholars of Islamic and Persian art may look at this phenomenon if being released from the bounds of Western art historical methodology. The paper aims to open current understandings of Persian art history to a re-reading. It does so by engaging with the inscribed/epigraphic text on an object/building as a systematic design strategy that constantly de- and re-constructs the object and the interwoven micro politico-cultural context around the object through activating the cognitive and emotive organs of the user of the art. In such a scenario, the object is no longer what is sensually perceived in isolation but is a set of invisible realisations that would be processed through the recollection of memories or linguistic-poetic sequences of association. By moving between different forms of art, this study shows how the application of text on Persian art operates as a mechanism through which the boundaries between different mediums of art blur, making space for the reception of art as a complex apparatus that functions through the layers of signification of Persian literature. This methodology may make way for a rethinking of the pedagogical systems of Persian art history and current Persian art exhibition practices.

### **Biography**

Dr Mahroo Moosavi is a lecturer in architectural history, theory, and design at the University of Sydney, Bahari fellow in the Persian Arts of the Book at University of Oxford and Oliver Smithies lecturer at Balliol College at University of Oxford. Her research is concerned with the intertext of architecture and poetry/prose, with a particular focus on the early modern Safavid Iran, through an interdisciplinary study of architectural history, literature, and post-structuralist philosophy. Her current project analyses the interpretations of form and structure of rhetorical devices in the chancellery writings of sixteenth and seventeenth century Iran to identify possible resonances within the artistic and urban system of the new city of Isfahan.