

شاهنامه

روایت ماندگار

Shahnameh

The Perpetual Narrative

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Shahnameh, The Perpetual Narrative

**A survey of impact of Shahnameh
on modern and contemporary art of Iran**

By Akram Ahmadi Tavana

Foreword by Dr. Firuza Melville

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Opening of the exhibition:

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open all days from 1 to 7 pm

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Artists presented in this exhibition are:

Arabari Sharveh . Nikzad Nojumi . Mehdi Hosseini . Gizella Varga Sinai . Fereydon Ave

Marziyeh Garadaghi . Farah Ossouli . Taraneh Sadeghian . Shirin Neshat

Jamshid Haghhighatshenas . Saeed Ravanbakhsh . Reza Hedayat

Behnam Kamrani . Yasaman Sinai . Alireza Jodey . Siamak Filizadeh . Amir Hossein Bayani

Ala Ebtekar . Artemis Shahbazi . Ali Reza Fani . Mahsa Kheirkhah . Aylin Bahmanipour

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The Shahnameh in the age of the Post-Shahnameh: from illustration to concept

از آن پس نمیرم که من زنده‌ام
که تخم سخن من پراگنده‌ام

I shall not die, these seeds I've sown will save
*My name and reputation from the grave...*¹

These words by Ferdowsi are always quoted to prove that his poem has universal importance and its narrative can be applied to all phenomena of human behaviour until nowadays. This essay is an attempt to discuss why the Iranian epic poem which was compiled a thousand years ago became a national symbol and until our days receives so many contemporary interpretations: contemporary to Ferdowsi, his successors and to us. There have been interpretations of text and image, while the text has been illustrated for more than 800 years, and much more frequently than Mona Lisa in the last 600 years.

Erik Maell, the author of the book specially dedicated to the exceptional popularity of Mona Lisa mentioned that 'no other painting in the history has been reproduced, reinterpreted, parodied, appropriated, and exploited as often as Mona Lisa'². The illustrations of the *Shahnameh* are much more numerous than all visual reinterpretations of Leonardo's masterpiece, and this phenomenon is the subject of this essay.

What is the Shahnameh?

Six years ago the world celebrated the Millennium of the completion of the *Shahnameh* in the version of Ferdowsi³, who for almost half of his life was writing his poem, or what sometimes is perceived in Europe as the encyclopaedia of Persian culture of its Golden Age, or the Persian bible: a legendary, heroic and romantic chronicle of his country since the creation of the world until the Arab invasion in the 7th century.

On 8 March 1010⁴ an old poet called Abu'l-Qasim Ferdowsi finished writing his *magnum opus*, having called it the *Shahnameh*, which could be translated from Persian 'The Book of Kings', or 'The King of Books' because it is a record of Persian royal dynasties in the shape of a poem that is still the longest ever written by a single author during the whole history of humankind. Authored by a hereditary aristocrat,

it is a brilliant example of chivalric literature covering all aspects of mediaeval Iranian upper class society.

The poem and its author are surrounded by so many legends that even Ferdowsi himself could be a legend as we do not have any contemporary sources about him. The earliest surviving manuscript of his renowned poem was produced only two centuries after his death (now kept in Florence and dated 1217). This means that we literally do not know what *Shahnameh* Ferdowsi wrote, and which copy of the earliest surviving versions is closer to the original, as the difference between some of them is enormous. Even his real name is not known: Abu'l-Qasim Ferdowsi can be translated as 'the father of Qasim from paradise', which was quite a common way to describe yourself in the mediaeval Islamic world.

However, from the very beginning Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* became a cult poem, a work of mythology, history, literature and propaganda: a living epic that became a symbol of national identity.

It is important to remember that Ferdowsi was not the first and the only to write his *shahnameh*: it was the time when the country needed a book like this. Similarly, in Arabia, the prophet Muhammad was among many of his contemporaries who claimed that they were receiving messages from God and declared themselves prophets and poets. In Iran it was the time when the global message was in the air: and the message was 'Motherland in danger!' And the main task of those *shahnamehs*, about which we know only that they started to appear around this time, was not to entertain but to consolidate the national forces against the foreign invasions around the right ruler who would have the right to possess *farr* (the divine charisma which can be given by God to only an Iranian and a royal by blood) and effectively solve all internal and external social, economic and political problems.

The campaign of collecting ancient folklore resulted in a great amount of tales and legends being compiled and organised in a corpus of ancient Iranian mythology according to the sequence of dynasties. Such compendium of legends, both imagined and historical, was equally perceived as trustworthy. It became the basis of the literary polished chronicle, where demons, angels, dragons and witches were participating in the narrative together with not only the Iranian heroes like elephant-sized Rostam, or the royal villains of Turan, as well as India, Byzantium and China but with Alexander the Great, Sasanian kings, or Sa'd b. Waqqas, the Arab general of the Muslim army.

Most likely Ferdowsi was writing his *manifesto* for the Samanids, the only dynasty that was Iranian by blood in the whole history of Iran since the start of the Islamic period. The Samanids ruled from Bukhara, enjoying their last glimpses of splendour, power and prosperity. Unfortunately, Ferdowsi was writing his book too long. By the time he finished the world behind the walls of his hereditary castle had drastically changed: the Samanids perished. They were conquered by the Turks led by Sultan Mahmud who established the capital of his powerful state in Ghazna: Ferdowsi's warning arrived too late.

The poet was trapped in his own mission: he had spent almost half of his life writing his very patriotic, nationalistic and royalist book about the foreigners invading his country,

1. Abu'l-Qasim Ferdowsi, transl. by Dick Davis

2. Erik Maell, *Mona Lisa* reinterpreted, Novato, 2015, 6.

3. The spellings in English of both *Shahnameh* and Ferdowsi are absolutely conventional and have nothing to do with historical transliteration, as the phonetic system of the Classical Persian language, starting from its earliest literary manifestations in New Persian in the 9th century, mainly the poetry of Rudaki, up to Jami in the 15th century would be closer in fact to modern Tajik, or Dari, generally more archaic in both grammar and pronunciation.

4. François de Blois, *Persian Literature. A Bio-bibliographical Survey*, 5 /1 Poetry to ca. A.D. 1100, ed. by C. A. Storey, London, 1992, 112-117; Firuza Abdullaeva & Charles Melville, Guest Editors' Introduction "Shahnameh: the Millennium of an Epic Masterpiece," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 43, no 1, February 2010. See also: A. Shapur Shahbazi, Ferdowsi, *A Critical Biography* (Costa Mesa, 1991), 23-30, for a comprehensive review of the evidence; despite all the calculations offered, he makes the surprising mistake of giving AD 939-40 as the equivalent of 329 AH, which actually covers 940-41. If the date in January 940 is correct, this should be 328 AH. See also Shahbazi, "Ferdowsi. i. Life," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 9, 514-515; Daulatshah Samarqandi, *Tadhkirat al-shu'ara*, ed. by E. G. Browne, Leiden and London, 1901, 54. The earliest report, however, namely the Preface to the *Baysunghur Shahnameh*, gives the date as 416 [1025], a fact generally overlooked (see *Baysunghur Shahnameh*, Gulistan Palace Museum, ms. 716: 22 (f. 12r); Shahbazi, "Biography," 27-28, cites Ja'far b. Muhammad, *Tarikh-i Ja'fari* (i.e. *Tarikh-i Kabir*), of c. 1446, for the year 416/1025.

but the one to whom he dedicated the deal of his life was Mahmud, the son of a Turkish slave who invaded his country!

Why did he decide to do this? Did he lose his mind like Don Quixote who refused to believe that the world was not like the one he wanted to see it?

Probably his main intention was to save his life's work from disappearance by giving it to someone who could appreciate at least its artistic merits. Sultan Mahmud was known as a great literary connoisseur: at his court he surrounded himself with dozens of brilliant poets⁵. But Mahmud was known even more as a great politician: at his court he established a special department of propaganda where the best poets of his time were employed to praise his personality, his lifestyle and his conquests. In case of Ferdowsi Mahmud had to make a serious choice: either to be known as a literary connoisseur, or a politician? And he preferred the second as he vividly saw that the poem was written not for him but against him. He did not have to pretend that he liked the poem for the sake of its artistic merits while its ideology disgusted him. He was already the most powerful ruler of the largest empire of his time. He had enough high-class poets to praise him, he did not need Ferdowsi, and the poem was rejected.

It is also possible that Mahmud felt that Ferdowsi tried to cheat him, thinking that he would swallow a bitter pill of its contents if it was wrapped in the sweet icing of lavish dedication to Mahmud, distributed on both sides of the poem - in the beginning and at the end. However, the pretty wrapping could not change the appeal and ideology of the poem, and after the superficial praise Mahmud could hear the genuine curse on all low class non-Iranian usurpers who should be kicked off the throne and out of the country.

What was even more important: Mahmud, using his strong pro-Sunni support was launching his regular military expeditions to India - the source of the enormous wealth of his empire under the umbrella of fighting the infidels. Ferdowsi's ambiguous religious identity, which was later declared pro-Shi'i, was probably an even more serious obstacle for his *Shahnameh* being accepted in Ghazna.

It is known that Ferdowsi used about a thousand *baits* (verses) of his predecessor Daqiqi, who allegedly was murdered in the bathhouse by his favourite slave. It is also believed that this murder was more a political assassination rather than a romantic tragedy, as Daqiqi was famous for his pro-Zoroastrian sympathies. In fact his thousand baits which Ferdowsi incorporated into his *Shahnameh* with proper acknowledgment were telling the story of the emergence of Zoroastrianism. Most likely the main reason for acknowledging Daqiqi's authorship was to avoid the responsibility for depicting Zaratushtra and his religion sympathetically: Ferdowsi's own reputation was already quite damaged. It was not only a legend that Ferdowsi was not allowed to be buried in the Muslim cemetery, but in his own estate, where under the Pahlavis his magnificent mausoleum a la Cyrus' tomb was erected.

Ferdowsi stops his narrative when the Arabs invade the

country and bring Islam. It was such a coincidence that the last Sasanian general who was destined to fight the Arabs was also called Rostam, like the greatest hero of the mythological part of the poem. Rostam's correspondence with the Arabs before his fatal battle seems to be very revealing about Ferdowsi's own ideas about Islam and the Arab invasion. It is notable that some medieval artists would depict him as unsurpassable mythological hero Rostam, and in some cases the illustration would contradict even Ferdowsi's text: the artists would refuse to accept that someone called Rostam could be defeated and so the single combat between the Iranian general Rostam and the Arab general Sa'd b. Waqqas would show Rostam killing Sa'd and not how it was in reality. It seems that for Ferdowsi the Iranian civilisation ended together with the Arab invasion, and there is nothing to write about afterwards.

Not surprisingly, Sultan's department of state propaganda declared the poem not only worthless but harmful, and ridiculed the ideals of Ferdowsi.

Shahnameh before and after Ferdowsi

Consequently, the *Shahnameh* disappeared for two centuries. What happened next? Since the thirteenth century until now the stories from the *Shahnameh* have been among the most popular in the Persian speaking world. Compared with Shakespeare's characters, who have become an inseparable part of the English culture, the *Shahnameh*'s characters are a natural part of the Persians' everyday life. The poem and its ideas, like phoenix, survived two centuries of oblivion and successfully resurrected to help the whole nation to survive the most difficult periods in its history: wars, revolutions and sanctions. Hundreds of luxuriously illustrated manuscript copies of the text as well as quite commercial-quality codices are kept in museums and libraries throughout the world as evidence of its popularity both in palaces and bazaars during the last thousand years.

However, the written tradition goes back to several centuries later. The earliest surviving manuscript dates back to 1217, i.e. about two hundred years after Ferdowsi's death, and the earliest surviving illustrated manuscripts belong to an even later period: the 14th century, i.e. another two centuries. This is one more enigma about Ferdowsi and his masterpiece, which is usually connected with Sultan Mahmud and his propaganda machine, namely role of the invasion of the Mongols who in turn were also responsible for the revival of the *Shahnameh*, trying to associate themselves with the idea of Iranian kingship and generally - the *creme de la creme* of the local culture.

Illustrating the Book of Kings

It is basically agreed that Ferdowsi's version of the great epic is the most frequently illustrated text in Persian art. The great Mongol *Shahnameh* (ca. 1330-36) and the Shah Tahmasp manuscript (mid-16th century) are towering masterpieces in the whole rich history of Persian painting⁶. It is known that some pre-Ferdowsi narratives which he later included into his *Shahnameh* inspired many silver objects of the Sasanian period (pl. 1) or Soghdian murals from Penjkent (now in the Hermitage Museum), which iconography once established would be developed later (pl. 2). The post-Ferdowsi but pre-manuscript ceramics of the 12th-13th centuries might

5. the number of 400 mentioned in medieval chronicles and anthologies can be considered as a metaphor of plentifulness. About his head-hunting methods see the mentioned above Nizami 'Aruzi Samarqandi's Four Discourses.

6. O. Grabar, "Why was the *Shahnameh* Illustrated?," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 43, Special issue 1 (Millennium of the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, 2010), pp.

also have been depicting the stories from non-Ferdowsi *shahnameh*-style narratives.

Shahnameh exhibitions

As far as almost all national and private, big and modest museums and libraries have manuscripts and artefacts related to the stories of the Shahnameh it would be a rare exhibition on Persian and Islamic art that would not contain at least a piece depicting one of its scenes.

The first celebration of the millennium in Iran, at the urging of the nationalist Sayyid Hasan Taqizadeh and others, has been well documented by Shahpur Shahbazi⁷, who discusses not only the construction of the modern tomb, which was inaugurated in 1934, but the month-long series of events in Tehran, Mashhad and Tus itself, as well as the publication of a large number of studies of Ferdowsi and the Shahnameh that were stimulated by the millennium. These include Henri Massé's *Ferdowsi et l'épopée nationale* (Paris, 1934) and special issues of Bakhtar Mehr, the *Journal Asiatique* and *Iran-i Bastan*. Furthermore, the occasion inspired some enduring contributions to scholarship, such as the new Burukhim edition of the text; the publication by Muhammad Qazvini of the Abu Mansuri version of the prose Preface, Fritz Wolff's invaluable glossary, *Glossar zu Ferdosis Schahname* (Berlin, 1935) and Dhabih-Allah Safa's magisterial *Hamasa-sara'i dar Iran* (Tehran, 1946)⁸.

Among the other celebrations outside Iran was an important conference on 29 May 1934 to celebrate the birth of Ferdowsi, hosted by the Oriental Institute and the State Hermitage Museum in Leningrad (St Petersburg), accompanied by an exhibition in the foyer of the Hermitage theatre. This too generated some valuable work, including L. T. Giuzal'yan and M. M. Dyakonov's catalogue of the Shahnameh manuscripts in Leningrad, an accompanying volume of illustrations, and a conference proceedings that includes valuable articles by many prominent Iranologists, including E. E. Bertels (later to supervise the publication of the complete Moscow edition). The introductory note was written by the Director of the Hermitage, Iosif Orbeli⁹.

Meanwhile art historians had been reminded of the importance of the Shahnameh in the formative stages of Persian miniature painting by the celebrated Exhibition at Burlington House in London, January–March 1931, which displayed numerous copies of the work¹⁰.

The last powerful wave of the Shahnameh Millennial celebrations washed the globe in 2010 from Tehran, Washington, and Dublin to Berlin, Lahore and St Petersburg. England hosted two of its most successful shows: one was in Cambridge on the traditional art of medieval Shahnameh manuscripts from the British collections 'Epic of the Persian Kings: The Art of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh' (curated by Barbara Brend). Its opening on 11 September 2010 at the Fitzwilliam Museum coincided not only with the anniversary of the beginning of American hysteria against the Muslim world but with the establishment of the Cambridge Shahnama Centre

which grew out of the British Academy-funded Cambridge Shahnama Project.

The Shahnama Project's main achievement to date is the creation of an interactive online database of about 20,000 images from the national museums, galleries, libraries and private collections in Iran, U.K., France, Russia, Germany, U.S.A., India, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Tajikistan, Armenia, Spain, Malaysia and other countries. The Project has had a great scholarly and public impact: the website is garnering widespread interest, with 9,000 different users around the world consulting it every day.

Contemporary Shahnameh exhibitions

In the same 2010 jubilee year another international exhibition took place in the London Prince's Gallery and it was solely dedicated to contemporary perception of the ideas of the Shahnameh. This event, apart from several solo exhibitions by André Sevruguin¹¹, Siamak Filizadeh, Farah Ossouli, Shirin Neshat, Taraneh Sadeghian, Jamshid Haghhighatshenas, Naser Mohammadi, Reza Hedayat, Artemis Shahbazi, Mohsen Keiany,¹² and several others, was the first international contemporary Shahnameh show in the whole history of modern art. It was curated by Zahra Hassan-Agha who at that time was affiliated at Sharjah University and the Cambridge Shahnameh Project. The show presented the works of seventeen famous and young artists from Iran, India, Pakistan, Russia, the US and Australia¹³.

After it there were two shows modest in size but extremely ambitious in perspective in Cambridge (2013 and 2014) as a part of the recently established series "Shahnameh Forever: Illustrating Shahnameh in the 21st century" (curated by Veronica Shimanovskaya). This series was born almost simultaneously with the Cambridge Shahnama Centre for Persian Studies due to the generous support of Bitā Daryabari.

The main idea of these exhibitions is to show the continuity of the ancient story and its modern visual interpretation contemporaneous with our changing world. In other words that the ancient tales of the Shahnameh lived not only in the past and buried in the dusty manuscripts placed in the museums and libraries but they and their ideas are still alive in our time, mind and heart, and despite being very Iranian (Parthian, Persian, Soghdian, Khwarazmian, or Scythian) in origin, they have no ethnic boundaries and can be comprehensible in any international community. The exhibitions' mission is to show the interaction between the past and present, literature, art, music and dance, high art and pop-culture, East and West, Iran, Europe and the world. For this reason, the paintings by Siamak Filizadeh, Farah Ossouli, Fereydoun Ave, Veronica Shimanovskaya, Golnar Malek, and Sama Soltani were combined with an Ilkhanid tile with the Ferdowsi's verse, Feofanov's tile depicting Ferdowsi flying the Simorgh (pl.4), and Shahnameh manuscripts illustrated between the 14th and 17th centuries from the Cambridge collections. One of the shows was organised together with the premier of the opera *Zahhak*: the

7. Shahbazi, "Ferdowsi, iv. Millenary celebration," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 9: 528–530.

8. See more in Akram Tavana essay below.

9. L.T. Giuzal'yan and M. M. Dyakonov, *Shahnameh manuscripts in the Leningrad collections*, Leningrad, 1934; *Iranian miniature paintings in the manuscripts of the Shahnameh manuscripts from the Leningrad collections*, Leningrad, 1935

10. See Laurence Binyon, J. V. S. Wilkinson and Basil Gray, *Persian Miniature Painting*, London, 1933.

11. Very recently a collection of more than a hundred paintings and photographs of Antoine and André Sevruguin's were presented to the Matenadaran by André Sevruguin's son Emmanuel. Twenty two of them depict the stories from the poems by Ferdowsi. Eight of them are currently on display. I thank Knarik Sahakyan for this information.

12. His latest exhibition "Unseen Shahnameh" is currently shown at the Sanat Gallery, Karachi.

13. *Painting the Persian Book of Kings today. Ancient text and modern images*, Cambridge, 2010.

Persian Dragon King (pl.24), composed by Hossein Hadisi, postdoctoral fellow at the Music Department, the University of Cambridge.

All these exhibitions were held in England, i.e. outside Iran and organised by non-Iranians. In Iran there has been one group Shahnameh workshop in Tehran (Laleh gallery, 2002), and a decade earlier - an exhibition of the contemporary reception of the *Shahnameh* in Iran. It was organised in Tehran's Afrand gallery by Ruyin Pakbaz in 1989, soon after the end of the Iran-Iraq war to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Islamic revolution and... the millennium of the completion of the poem (sic)¹⁴. It was quite a personal feat for both the thirteen artists and the organiser, as the participants in the war and the old revolutionaries were still associating the epic negatively with the overthrown regime rather than with national heroism in the style of Ferdowsi's Rostam¹⁵. Seemingly uneventful show was followed in 1990 by the International Ferdawsi Congress at Tehran University, where Ferdawsi was presented as a Shi'i with the special emphasis on the so-called 'Ship of Faith' passage¹⁶, while even his characters acquired some Muslim features.

It is believed that Iran's social, political and cultural domains have been dominated by three main components: modernity and its place in Iranian politics and society; nationalism; and Islamic Shi'i identity¹⁷. In the *Shahnameh* the idea of the martyrdom of several key characters, like Siyavush, Iraj, or Sohrab is very prominent and has the most natural continuation in the Shi'i mourning ceremonies of Imam 'Ali and his sons, which gives a unique merge of pre-Islamic and Shi'i Islamic ideas, peculiar to Iranian culture, and particularly reflected in visual culture. Popular representations produced for the *muharram* processions and '*ashura* ceremonies are very similar in nature to the very ancient tradition of pre-Islamic cult of the *sug-e Siyavush* ('mourning of Siyavush') known in Soghdian and Khwarazmian milieux of Transoxania.

The general iconography of the stories used for the *pardeh*¹⁸ illustration programme widely represented in the interior decoration of the coffee houses is thus shared by both the *shahnameh-khani*¹⁹ and *ta'ziyeh*²⁰ performances. This was shown very explicitly at the latest exhibition of the *Art of the Coffee Houses*, in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 2007. Such a merge would mean that any modern movements in Iranian art, like for example the famous

Saqqa-khaneh²¹, which do not have an obvious relevance to the *Shahnameh*, would be still impregnated with its ideas.

So if the above-mentioned definitions of Iranian cultural identity (modernity, nationalism and shi'ism) are correct, the answer to the question why the contemporary *Shahnameh* exhibitions are so rare seems to be rather simple. If the idea of the *Shahnameh* is identical to the idea of Iran, the attempt to create something which already exists makes a special event rather pleonastic in Iran. The attitude towards it abroad is completely different.

Persian contemporary non-Shahnameh art

Iranian contemporary art has been a great fashion at the international art auctions and shows with the increasing popularity, especially since the Islamic revolution. At the latest 56th Venetian Biennale (9 May-22 November 2015) Iranian art was shown in several pavilions and a full scale publication was prepared²². However, most of the Iranian artworks participating in western auctions conform to the existing trends, making their art unidentifiable as specifically Iranian, producing the *déjà vu* impression with easily identifiable sources of inspiration, like Picasso, Duchamp, Matisse, Shagal, Warhol, Klimt, or Kandinsky.

Such process of integration of Iranian visual art into western culture started during the Pahlavi period despite the personal royal support of folk arts and crafts. It was the time when the rapidly europeanising Persian urban society was eagerly and enthusiastically absorbing western elements in literature, visual art, music, dance, cinema, etc., trying to prove that art is universal and not tied up to and by national identities. However, the many-century tradition was too robust and resistant, as seen in a poem by Forugh Farrokhzad who was among those who started to wage the war against the old rules and traditions. However, having adopted purely western ideas and rules of prosody into her poetry, she wrote one of the most enchanting poem called Ghazal (چون سنگها صدای مرا گوش می کنی), which could compete in its classical style and technique with the masterpieces of the past. The same phenomenon could be applied in visual art.

There have been many waves of artistic interaction between Iran and the West. After the Hellenistic interaction with the Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian dynasties the next serious wave of Perso-European cultural intercommunication arrived in Persia during the Safavid period²³. More actively the artists started to turn from the 700-year old tradition to a style more European in expression in the mid-19th century. However, it was already during the Pahlavi period that the images in many cases stopped being just illustrations of the text but started to express a completely different, conceptual approach of representing not only the stories but their ideas.

Despite such long process of latent *gharbzadegi* (western influence), Iranian contemporary culture managed to keep a very peculiar feature which is unique and distinguishes it from all others. This unique feature reflecting the Iranian

14. The anniversary was quite a conventional: Ferdowsi completed his poem in 1010 and died most likely in 1020.

15. See introduction by Akram Tavana, p.

16. Raya Y. Shani, 'Illustrations of the parable of the Ship of Faith in Firdausi's prologue to the Shahnama', *Shahnama Studies I*, London, 2006

17. Hamid Keshmirshekan, *Contemporary Iranian Art*. New Perspectives, London, 2013, Kirstie Imber, review of H. Keshmirshekan, "Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 49, issue 1, 2016, 176-180; Mahmud Omidisalar, *Poetics and Politics of Iran's National Epic, the Shahnameh*, New York, 2011; *Iran's Epic and America's Empire*, A handbook for a generation in limbo, Santa Monica, 2012; Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran*, New Haven, 2010, 14.

18. Curtain, used by a traveling storyteller during his partly improvised performances, which happen usually in the coffeehouses, or outdoors. Such curtains have the whole story visually narrated on one piece of canvas. A storyteller during his performance refers to a particular episode depicted on the *pardeh*. The sequence of episodes is not necessarily arranged in order. Usually the main scene, where the story culminates is placed in the centre, while less important episodes are shown along the borders or randomly around.

19. Recitations of the stories from the *Shahnameh*, which is a very ancient tradition going back to the pre-Islamic times.

20. Street passion play dedicated to the mourning of those perished at the battle of Kerbelā (10 Muharram 61/10 October 680)

21. Hamid Keshmirshekan, *Saqqa-kana ii*. School of art (2009), Encyclopaedia Iranica online.

22. Iran: *iranomutomorphosis.net*. Contemporary artists from Iran, Treviso, 2014.

23. *The Fascination of Persia. The Persian-European dialogue in Seventeenth-century art and contemporary art of Teheran*, Zurich, 2013, especially the essay by Gary Schwartz, "Between Court and Company. Dutch artists in Persia," 152-170.

national mentality is rooted in the exceptionally high interest of the general public in the national literary heritage.

Such phenomenal knowledge of the classical literature is caused by the very traditional style of education still widely practised in Iran and based on memorising enormous amounts of poetry alongside religious texts both in Persian and Arabic, exactly as it was prescribed in the collection of historical anecdotes *Chahar Maqaleh* ('Four discourses') compiled in the 12th century by Nizami Aruzi Samarqandi²⁴. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most popular poet of contemporary Iran is the 14th-century Hafez ('the one who knows the whole Qur'an by heart') whose ghazals are used in the everyday life in Iran in the same capacity of fortune telling as the Qur'an.

Generally, contemporary Iranian art has a lot in common with the national classics, both in literature and visual art, however, in many cases deliberately hidden to be revealed by the connoisseurs. Not often easily recognisable subjects, they are mostly only fragments of arabesque decor, or elements of images in different styles - Timurid, Safavid, particularly Qajar both royal and popular. They are heavily used by the artists working in various genres: painting, photography, digital collage, 3-D, video, film, theatre, music, opera, ballets, video games, etc. Their purpose is to give a hint of their knowledge of the history and the connection with the rich and ancient heritage. Among them are²⁵: Nasser Oveissi ('In blue', 1977; Where have the riders gone?, 2007); Aydin Aghdashloo ('Untitled', 1979), Parviz Tanavoli ('Farhad, the Mountain Carver', and many others); Shadi Ghaderian ('Qajar' series, 2001), Sadegh Tirafkan ('Multitude Nos 1, 4, 7', 2008; 'Whispers of the East' series, 2006-7); Shadi Ghaderian ('Ghajar series', 1998-9); Shoja Azari ('Fake: Idyllic Life', 'The king is black', 2013); Babak Kazemi ('Exit of Shirin and Farhad', 2012); Arman Estepanian ('Mahgol', 'New Art' series, 2011); Shiva Sherveh ('Rostam's doll', 2013); Mona Hakimi-Schuler ('Stories I live by' series, 2013); Ahmad Amin Nazar ('Untitled', 2012); Shahriar Ahmadi ('Mi'raj' series, 2009; 'Memories of the First Hijra centuries' series, 2010); Reza Panahi (2008); Mostafa Choobtarash ('And so, I ordered the crickets' stings' series, 2012); Pooya Abbasian and Farshid Monfared ('Akil al-Muluk' series, 2009); Hadi Nasiri ('In my name', 2009); Sohrab Kashani ('The adventures of super-Sohrab' series, 2012); Mortaza Talebi ('The sword dance from the beginning of the end', 2010); Rokni Haerizadeh ('Leyli and

24. This collection consists of the stories of exceptional importance for the history of Persian culture because it has the earliest surviving information about the greats of the Persian Golden age, including Ferdowsi himself. Nizami Aruzi in his only surviving *Mirror for Princes* was instructing the young prince how to become an educated ruler by learning hundreds of lines in both languages - the language of their religion and the language of their poetry.

25. Only a selection of artists' names is given here, based on the materials already published in the following most recent catalogues and studies: Rose Issa and Ruyin Pakbaz, *Iranian contemporary art*, London, 2002; Fereshteh Daftari and Haggai Ram, *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, London, 2002; Talinn Grigor, *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*, London, 2014; *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, London, 2015; *Iran inside out. Influences of homeland and diaspora on the artistic language of contemporary Iranian artists*, New York, 2009; *Different Sames. New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*, H. Keshmirshakan (ed.), London, 2009; H. Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian Art. New Perspectives*, London, 2013; Susann Wintsch, "I can't get no sleep: contemporary art in Tehran," in: *The Fascination of Persia. The Persian-European dialogue in seventeenth-century art and contemporary art of Tehran*, Zurich, 2013, 266-293; Fereshteh Daftari and Layla Diba, *Iran Modern*, New Haven, 2013; Iran: iranomutomorphosis.net. Contemporary artists from Iran, Treviso, 2014; *The eye of the Shah. Qajar Court Photography and the Persian Past*, ed. Jennifer Y. Chi, New York, 2015. I also thank Janet Rady for her advice regarding some artists and their works.

Majnoon", 2006); Bahman Jalali ("A woman smoking qalyan", 2001); Rahim Najfar ("A Horseback rider in Ta'ziya", 1974); Hojatolla Shakiba ("Memorial photo", 1977); Gizilla Varga Sinai ("Untitled", 1990), Alireza Fani ("Employment", 2012); Ramin Haerizadeh ('Men of Allah' series, 2008); Taravat Talepasand ("The order of the Sun and Lion", 2007); Seyfollah Samadian ("Heaven and Hell", 2008); Afshan Ketabchi ("Banana" and "Behind the Hatch" from 'The Harem' series, 2008); Shirin Neshat ('Qajar' series); Poursan Jinji ("Louis Vuitton II", 2005; "Dual panel 4", 2007); Narges Hashemi ("Today is a gift", 2008); Khosrow Hassanzadeh ("Takhti", 2007; 'Ya Ali madad' series, 2008 and 'Pahlevan' series, 2006); Parastou Forouhar ("RED is my name. GREEN is my name", 2008; Kiss me, 2013); Asad Faulwell ("Pillars - Iran [1882-1989]", 2009); Monir Farmanfarmayan ("Heartache No 5, The Qajar Legacy", 2008?); Ala Ebtakar ("Elemental", 2004; "Ascension", 2007; "Under the indigo dome II", 2009); Fataneh Dadkhah ("Destruction", 2007?); Andisheh Avini ("Untitled", 2006); Fereydoun Ave ("Rostam in late summer revisited" series, 2000; "Endangered species", 2003); Hojat Amani ('Angel' series, 2010); Kamrooz Aram ("Mystic visions undetected by night vision strengthen the faith of the believers and make their enemies scatter. Part II", 2007); Nazgol Ansarnia ("Patterns", 2008); Shiva Ahmadi ("Horses", "Boat", "Pigs", 2007; "Oil barrel red", 2008; "Hocus-pokus", 2009); Negar Ahkami ("Wanted hand", 2006; "Islamables Mehrab shelf", 2004-7; "Trying to pluck her eyebrows, she blinded herself", 2009); Afsoon ('Seasons of love talismans' series, 2008; 'Fairytale icon' series, 2009); Samira Abbasy ("Favorite of ten thousand to my soul", 2005, "Moth to a flame", 2008), Zhazeh Tabatabaei ("Lioness and the Sun lady", 1960s); Ali Akbar Sadeqi ("Zal and Simorgh", 1978); Kambiz Derambakhsh ('Black miniatures' series, 1973-5); Hamid Hemayatian ('Permissibility: the Ambiguous and Distorted Historical Identity' series, 2014). Jalali Sousan-Abadi (Wealth of love, 1991), Soody Sharifi ("Love is in the air" from 'Maxiatures' series, 2007), Ali Chitsaz ("The battle of Mamasani", 2008).

A very similar style of reinterpretation was applied by the Iranian artists to the well-known imagery of Western European art: Aydin Aghdashloo (from 'Memories of destruction' series, 1975 and 2001); Shirin Neshat (Pari, 2008); Ghessam Hajizadeh (untitled, 2006); Farah Ossouli ("Ars Poetica", 2009), Farideh Lashai ("4 minutes 30 seconds to recover Le temps perdu", 2008).

There are still quite a lot of artists who are continuing the tradition of folk crafts, following the style of *pardehs* and coffee house art, emulating the classical style of book miniature painting, carpet designs, glass painting, wood marquetry, etc.: Hadi Khan Tajvidi ("Shahnameh Majles", 1926; "Purple dome", 1930), or their European-style imitations: Abutaleb Moghimi Tabrizi ("If you want to know what wisdom is ask the dervishes", 1966); Mahmoud Javadipour (Ta'ziyeh, 1954; Festivity, 1958); Abbas Bolokifar ("Karbala Epic", 1985); Kazem Chalipa ("Zul-Janah", 1985); Mohammad Bagher Aghamiri ("Ashura Noon", 1986); Majid Mehregan ("Phoenix and Dragon", 1983); Mohammad Modabber ("The battle of Rostam", early 20th century); and Mahmoud Farshchian ("Flagbearer of Justice", 2010).

Post-Shahnameh, or the Shahnameh of our times

Right after the poem was finished it started to receive an unlimited number of imitations and emulations, some of which were interpolated into the corpus of the text by later authors and scribes throughout the centuries so masterfully

that nowadays it is not an easy task to identify which particular parts do not belong to Ferdowsi. The interpolated stories and the whole cycles about additional heroes, like Garshasp, Barzu, Faramarz, and others double the possible original up to ca. 80,000 baits.

All Ferdowsi's mediaeval successors tried to surpass their predecessor(s) and offer their own 'improved' version: among them were Asadi Tusi, Gurgani, Nizami, Amir Khosrow Dihlavi and many others. Such emulations have never stopped emerging. Ferdowsi's characters reappear in Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun*, or in Tajik poetry of W.W.II. Once translated, these stories receive further interpretations in text, for example, 'Khosrow and Shirin' play by Grigory Ptitsyn (1941); Xanthe Gresham 'Rostam and Tahmineh' storytelling (2010).

Sculpture

In the first years after the Islamic revolution the attitude to the Shahnameh was influenced by the negative feelings towards the overthrown Pahlavi dynasty, who were associating themselves with the kings of the Shahnameh and Keyanid-Achaemenid glory. However, Abolhasan Seddeghi's monument to Ferdowsi on the Ferdowsi square survived the political turmoils although during the latest green movement it was among the first to acquire its green scarf. Seddighi, before his great commission to contribute to Ferdowsi mausoleum in Tus, was offered to create his sculpture to be sent to Rome in 1958 to represent the Iranian national symbol at the entrance to the villa Borghese. Due to this monument this square was called after Ferdowsi. By now this place hosts quite a few other literary icons of their nations²⁶.

The 3D digital very detailed metal-like models of Ferdowsi and his characters have been produced by Aydin Salsabili (pl.29).

Films

Among the first cinematographic interpretations there was Kimyagarov's quite Eisenstein-inspired *Kaveh's Banner* (1961) (pl. 26), followed by his romantic trilogy (*The Legend of Rostam*, 1971; *Rostam and Sohrab*, 1971, and *The Legend of Siyavush*, 1976), all in rather Soviet realism style. In Iran Bahram Beyzai's polemic film *The Death of Yazdgerd* was almost lost in between the generations as it was finished in the year of the Islamic revolution (1979) and thus was not welcomed on the Iranian television or cinemas due to the changed dress code for women. Among the latest, Iranian TV productions there was a heavily nationalistic 28-episode film *Forty Soldiers* (Chanel 4, 2007), where Ferdowsi's heroes Rostam, Sohrab and Isfandiayr join forces with Imam Ali, Malek Ashtar²⁷ and Abu Rafi²⁸, and fight against the forty American commandos under general Hamilton who invaded Iran²⁹.

Animation

Ferdowsi's characters are still a part of the everyday life of the Iranians, as shown with warm and slightly bitter satire in

26. Piazzale Ferdovsi is now a polygon of the national identities rivalry: next to Ferdowsi a monument to Nizami was erected by the Azerbaijan embassy (S. Mamedov and A. Ibadullaev, 2012), while the monument to Gogol was put by the Russian embassy (Z. Tsereteli, 2002).

27. Imam Ali's most devoted companion.

28. the governor of the Jewish fort Khaibar.

29. Obviously, a mirror image of the early Christian myth of the Forty Roman soldiers of Sebaste, or forty martyrs of Christ who in the year of 320 were frozen to death but did not betray their faith.

the Pouya Afshar-Soroush Rezaee animation series project "Rostam in Wonderland" (2012-3) about the Rostam of the 11th century, who happened to be transferred to Tehran of the 21st century (pl. 33). Animation-type films since the first films by Ali Akbar Sadeghi (*Seven Cities*, 1971; *Malek Khorshid*, 1975; *Zaal and Simorgh*, 1977 and others) are particularly popular both in Iran and abroad. Almost all of them offer their own interpretations of the ancient stories, including Mehran Ghahari's complete reinterpretation of the famous tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab (2010), where in the finale it is not Rostam who kills his son but Sohrab who kills his father.

Opera and ballet

Due to Behrouz Gharibpour's puppet version of Loris Tjeknovarian's opera *Rostam and Sohrab* (1963) it is now possible to enjoy the original music production with female voices in the Ferdowsi Hall of Tehran and even watch the famous scene of the only night which Rostam and Tahmineh spent together.

The *Feridun-Özsoy* Opera played an important role in the modern history and diplomacy of Iran and Turkey. When Mostafa Kemal was preparing for the visit of Reza Khan in 1934, Ahmed Saygun (1907-1991) was commissioned to produce the first Turkish European-style opera *Özsoy*, which helped to re-establish good relationship between the two countries. In this opera Tur (Wolf) instead of following Ferdowsi and out of jealousy murdering his brother Iraj (Lion), reconciles with Iraj for the sake of their eternal brotherhood and filial love towards *Feridun-Özsoy*. Such a twist of the story removed the reason for the never-ending war between the two nations of Iran and Turan (with which Ferdowsi was associating the Turks).

Apart from the whole series of Soviet ballets, following the story of Khosrow and Shirin, the ballet *Kaveh the Blacksmith* (2004, composer Ahmad Pejman) was staged by Nima Kian and his Les Ballets Persans company based in Stockholm (pl.23).

Propaganda postcards

The well-established iconography of the most popular scenes of the Shahnameh during the many-hundred years of illustrating the poem was used by the British propaganda for producing the anti-Nazi posters³⁰. Two prominent professors Mojtaba Minovi (1903-1976) of Tehran, and Arthur Arberry (1905-1969) of Cambridge, advised political cartoonist Kem (Kimon Evan Marengo (1907-1988) who served at the British Ministry of Information during W.W.II. on the illustrations depicting Hitler as Zahhak. The image of Zahhak or the dragon king for centuries has been associated with the idea of universal evil, tyranny and suppression in general and the symbol of the foreign invasion in particular, although Ferdowsi's Arab Prince Zahhak never invaded Iran, on the contrary was invited by the Iranian nobles to rule country (pl. 7). Zahhak etymologically goes back to its Avestan prototype - the three headed demon Azhi-Dahaka. In the Shahnameh it is already a human king who like Faust sold his soul to the Devil. To avoid the torments of the serpents he acquired by the order of the Devil he has to feed them with the human brains. So this monster is literally devours the people of the country he is supposed to rule.

30. A. Wynn, *The Shahname and British propaganda in Iran in World War II*, *Manuscripta Orientalia*, vol. 16, No. 1, June 2010, 3-5; Omidisalar, *Iran's Epic and America's Empire*, 142-3.

To commemorate the Tehran conference of November-December 1943, Kem produced a series of six postcards where Hitler was consistently depicted as Zahhak, while his snakes bore the portrait likeness of his allies Mussolini and Hirohito³¹ (pl. 6). In the mediaeval manuscript illustrations Feridun, the great saviour of the Iranian nation, is usually depicted riding the cow Barmaya arriving at the mountain Demavand (outside Tehran) to observe Zahhak being bound inside its dead crater. This traditional scene was replaced by Kem with three brave champions of anti-Nazi coalition: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin riding white horses. Barmaya by the time when Feridun became the king was already dead but such a discrepancy did not bother the anonymous artist, and it did not bother Kem.

It is remarkable that Akram Ahmadi Tavana, the author of this survey, an artist in her own right, also focuses on the image of Zahhak as the idea of the evil which exists among us in the shape of a human being of common origin. Ahmadi Tavana's interpretation of Zahhak of our days is very similar to the one by composer Hadisi: he is difficult to recognise as he adapted himself to modern life so successfully that even his famous snakes became invisible (pl.24).

Despite such consistently negative understating of this infernal image it is quite symptomatic to see one of the most fascinating illustrations of this episode 'recycled' to produce both conceptual art, like in Soody Sharifi's "Love is in the air", 2007 (pl. 15) and on the objects of an American fashion design company³². While Sharifi's idea is obviously to show that modern Iranians are still at home with their old and sophisticated culture, the designers seem to have little knowledge about it as the item is indicated as 'miniature shawl, Persian pattern'³³ (pl. 27). Most likely their targeted clientele are the Iranian emigre milieu, who although they do not know well the iconography of the famous Shahnameh imagery keep their attachment and interest in their cultural heritage.

Shahnameh as a book of love and generosity, or unleashed violence

During the exhibition in the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2010 one of the visitors left a note in the visitors' book, saying that he thought he was coming to the exhibition to see the illustrations to poetry and love, and saw the most violent scenes of human cruelty. Indeed, among all existing Shahnameh manuscripts there are two most common types of standard iconography: enthronements or royal receptions, and battle scenes. Royal receptions either in a garden or in a palace are for the most part rather static and unexciting. However, most of the battle depictions are full of shocking details of mass decapitations, bisections, impaling on poles, crucifixions, shootings, stabbings, hangings on gallows, devourings by horrible fire-breathing dragons, and fights with hairy demons with flaming eyes. Fountains of blood and pyramids of cut off human heads appear in the most delicately depicted landscapes and intricate interiors. As if the paintings try show the contrast of two happily co-existing worlds: the absolute infinite beauty of static nature and the infinite ugliness of stormy human activity.

31. Omidshah, Iran's epic and America's empire. A Handbook for a generation in Limbo,

32. Cotton shawl by Alango, bringing underground fashion online, 2016.

33. "Zahhak sees the snakes growing out of his shoulders", attributed to Sultan Muhammad, Shah Tahmasp Shahnameh (1524-1576), f. 26v, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran

Obviously, human nature has hardly changed: Hollywood thrillers, or violent video games bring incredible profit to their producers. Most of the artworks at the exhibition have more violence than serenity, but its aim is to show the difference between the violence of the computer game and the wakening messages of art.

It seems that the general tendency of contemporary Iranian art has its direction towards not entertaining literature but in many cases gruesome history, with the idea of violence and hypertrophic 'masculinity'³⁴ in the background. This is most likely due to a combination of political and social factors, especially the Iran-Iraq war, which left a deep and hardly healing scar on the whole generation. Iranian artists both inside and outside the country in many cases use the visual patterns of the Shahnameh to reflect this phenomenon as during Ferdowsi's times violence, mass battles, death and blood were much more common than short periods of peace and gayety. By contrast, artworks dedicated to the Shahnameh, produced by non-Iranians have a completely different reception and interpretation of the similar episodes. Foreign artists tend to illustrate the stories, trying to give a close depiction of the textual original. At the same time their approach is not free from rather orientalist understanding of Ferdowsi's legends as romantically exotic Persian fairy tales, like in the imaginative art deco painting by Vardges Surenyants Ferdowsi reads his Shahnameh before Sultan Mahmud (1913, pl.20). Iranian artists usually go beyond mere illustration, while the most prominent feature of their concept is dissatisfaction, torture, and pain, decline, murder, and death. Even extremely decorative and delicate artworks, like, for example, by Ossouli, carry the same idea.

Pictures from the exhibition

Iranian perception of Iranian national epic: back to roots

Only very few artworks will be discussed in this brief preface with the focus on those who know well both the textual and visual originals, the stories, which became a part of the classical Persian literature illustrative tradition and apply their knowledge and experience in their artworks. They, like Ossouli and Filizadeh, have developed their own concept, style and sometimes technique expressing their ideas. In many cases they introduce a comparison, not only between past and present and East and West, but also between kitsch and pop, and high art. Their visual interpretations tell their own stories, and in great detail.

For example, in his drawings Kambiz Derambakhsh, deliberately emulates a very laconic and decorative technique of Reza-ye Abbasi-style album portraits. The main theme of his easily recognisable settings of the generic Timurid- and Safavid-like paintings is the idea of death, murder, and blood depicted in a mundane and routine manner. Such medieval cruelty, which is a norm of the contemporary everyday life, is striking.

A very similar interpretation of the universal themes of love, birth and joy being juxtaposed with betrayal, pain, torture and death is depicted in the most exquisite technique of Farah Ossouli's paintings. The first impression they produce is infinite serene beauty, which by the time one gets closer to the details turns to the shocking cruelty and injustice of

34. Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, 'Emerging forms of masculinity in the Islamic republic of Iran', in: Cultural revolution in Iran. Contemporary popular culture in the Islamic Republic, eds. A. Sreberny and M. Torfeh, London, 59-80.

fate. This Fate is represented quite often in her Shahnameh series paintings by both a very masculine bearded Devil and a very feminine Angel - both having huge handsome wings, as in the manuscript paintings. For example, in her "Love and Death" from the 'Shahnameh' series (2007) she tells the story of Tahmineh's love, Sohrab's birth and his death - all witnessed by the symbols of Good and Evil, and connected by the Tree of Life. Her brand image is a winged Timurid-style warrior with a statically beautiful face who for the sake of what he believes is right, commits the most ugly crimes.

Sometimes she intertwines contemporary poetry into the mediaeval-like microscopically minute and exceptionally decorative ornamental details which turn to the various tools of murder and death: guns, daggers, swords. In the exhibition triptych, Ossouli narrates the tragic story of Siyavush. Three panels represent three phases of his life, the main indications of them are always in the compositional centre: the dawn of life with a blossoming cherry and a pink sky in the background, with two scenes above and below: the girl (his future mother) is harassed by her drunk father and the birth of Siyavush. The Day panel with the blue sky but a big cloud in the middle has two scenes: the unsuccessful seduction of his step mother Sudabeh and the subsequent ordeal by fire to prove his innocence to his father King Kay Kavus. The third panel is the night of Siyavush's life: with the stunningly tall and beautiful cypress tree in the middle surrounded by the clouds. The two scenes depict him in bed with his beloved wife, Princess Farangis, the daughter of the King of Turan, Afrasiyab. He is telling her his nightmare, he has just seen - how he will be betrayed and executed. In the cartouche below his prophetic dream comes true: he is beheaded.

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Siamak Filizadeh's set of digital prints of his Rostam-II-The Return series ('Rostam returns after 30 years being brought up abroad', 2008) has been already acquired by two American museums (LACMA and MMA). His Rostam II is an ideal combination of the Persian tradition, reflected in the complex of typically Iranian phenomena, like zurkhaneh and the art of coffeehouses (collective image of Rostam-II), together with the deepest knowledge of the mediaeval iconography of the popular scenes of the Shahnameh (the White Div as a Drug dealer of the megapolis of Tehran), quite severe irony towards western pop-culture (Tahmineh, Spiderman), excellent understanding of the Iranian tradition and exceptionally kind and gentle sense of humour and sarcasm towards the world of the celebrities (wedding and divorce threat of Rostam-2 and Tahmineh).

It was quite unexpected to see after such a good-humoured project Filizadeh's next exhibition of staged digital photography in a Fellini-type deliberately theatrical setting. 'Under Ground' was dedicated to quite a macabre topic of the historical assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah (1831-1896), who is periodically exhumed, assassinated and buried again. Remarkably precise is his depiction of the main participants of the Great Game: Shah's prime minister, his man-like harem dwellers, and of course a Russian and a British envoys (pl.8). This brilliant although a bit disturbing show has a very clear message: the post-Ferdowsi Shahnameh is as actual for Iranian history and culture as pre- and the one by Ferdowsi.

Shirin Neshat's 'The Book of Kings' series of 2012, especially her *Divine Rebellion* (pl.9), has a warning as serious as Ferdowsi's Shahnameh when he was creating his manifesto

against the enemies of Iran. The warning is very quiet as death can be, but extremely powerful. The legs hanging in the air still bear the tattoo signs of the taste of their dead owner: it is a reproduction of a lithographic scene of Rostam killing the great Turanian warrior Ashkabus. A splash of his blood indicates the end of the battle and yet another victory of Iran. Very poignantly chosen episode as it often appears as a motto of the whole poem on the Qajar lacquer bindings of the Shahnameh manuscripts.

Apart from the Iranian artists working on the themes of contemporary Shahnameh, there are two more categories which should be mentioned. One consists of professional artists who are not Iranian by origin but offer their own interpretation of the Iranian epic masterpiece.

Non-Iranian artists from East and West: orientalists or at home among strangers

One of the earliest non-Iranian painters who presented his own Shahnameh series was André Sevruguin. Although Armenian by blood, Sevruguin grew up in Persia and knew Persian, so the Shahnameh was a part of his culture as well. The collection of his watercolours, recently donated by his son Emmanuel Sevruguin to the National Library of Armenia (Matenadaran) consists of his various representations of the Shahnameh stories, some of them betraying his good knowledge of the many-century illustration tradition, as, for example, *Farangis*, *Kay Khosrow and Tus crossing the Oxus*, or the completely westernised interpretation of the *Ascension of the angel Soroush* and *Key Kavus ascending the sky*. Another artist, Zahra Hassan Agha, the organiser of the London jubilee exhibition of 2010, is of Pakistani origin, so for her to understand Ferdowsi and his cultural milieu was also much easier than to complete westerners. However, apart from good usage of the traditional arabesque ornament of the background and the image of the early Mughal-like flower as protagonist of her visual narrative, her interpretation of the first meeting of Zal and Rudabeh (*The Fall*, 2010, pl. 14) has a strong connotation with Pink Floyd's 'flower scene' from their *Wall* (1978).

Non-Iranian artists illustrating the Iranian national epic is a subject of special research and publication. It would be enough to say that in many cases they would use its themes, like Montesquieu in his Persian letters during the French Enlightenment époque, to discuss their own, or non-ethnically limited ideas. However, most of them would inevitably have some Orientalist flavour. One of the best and the earliest such examples is porcelain vase from the Hermitage Museum, depicting the story of Bizhan and Manizheh³⁵ (M. Moh, 1946, Lomonosov/Imperial Porcelain Factory (pl. 19).

Veronica Shimanovskaya, a British artist of Russian origin offered her own, rather feminist approach to the Bizhan and Manizheh story (pl.17): according to Ferdowsi, neither Rostam, nor even Bizhan sitting in the pit let Manizheh know about the plan for how to rescue him, although it was Manizheh who lost everything for the sake of her love to Bizhan and who was the means of communication with Rostam. The reason for such disrespectful attitude towards her was their mistrust of women in general. In Shimanovskaya's large painting there are no Rostam or Bizhan. It is only one real heroine in this story and in the picture: it is Manizheh as a

35. Once upon a time, Christmas gift, Exhibition catalogue, St Petersburg: State Hermitage Museum, 2015, 88.

symbol of love, suffering, generosity, and forgiveness. She is looking down into the pitch dark pit, the walls of which are painted with some particles of soil. She is trying to see her beloved, but she sees us.

Sergey Feofanov's chamotte "Ferdowsi riding Simorgh" (pl. 4) is his interpretation of the continuity of the extremely culturally diverse (with Persian, Chinese and Mongol influences) tile decoration of the Imperial Palace in Takht-e Sulayman (pl. 5) and his own vision of the idea of Simorgh connecting the earthly and celestial world, supernatural creative fertility and Ferdowsi's divine inspiration, very similar to the vision of Abolhasan Seddighi and Hasanali Vaziri in their version of Ferdowsi flying on Simorgh (1933), present whereabouts unknown (pl. 3).

Victor Zabelin's "Tahmineh coming to Rostam" (pl. 21) at night reflects the situation of the labour migrants in St Petersburg, where the carriers of the Persian culture are mostly Tajiks and Afghans. This explains why his Rostam is depicted not as a noble knight in shining armour but more like a Tajik stall owner in the market.

Children's Shahnameh

It is of special interest to compare the Shahnameh illustrations in children's books published in Iran and outside the country. Among the best British editions is the Shahnameh stories, rendered by Elizabeth Laird, and illustrated by Shirin Adl³⁶ (pl.12) in a very bright palette and technique of traditional collage, and what is important: with great respect for the original.

Quite the opposite tendency can be seen in Iran, where a lot of publications blindly imitate western imagery, and particularly the Disney Cinderella style, where all female characters as illustrated by, for example, Peyman Soltani (pl.10), look almost identical, even being all blond³⁷. It would be unfair to suggest that Soltani never consulted or disliked the mediaeval illustrations of the Shahnameh. Even more unfair would be to accuse her of not knowing Ferdowsi's stories as she was following the text adapted by Ali Dayi. The question is: were these discrepancies deliberate, i.e. do the blond ladies of such Shahnameh reflect the aspirations of the little Iranian girls for whom these books were designed to become the characters of Shirin Aliabadi ("Miss Hybrid 6", pl. 11) with blond hair, blue contact lenses and straightened noses? In any event: should we consider such diversions from Ferdowsi as mistakes and negligence, or the result of their deliberate creative approach, similar to the one applied by Nizami, Amir Khosrow, Jami, Nazim Hikmet, Xanthe Gresham, Zabelin, and many others?

It is notable that the previous wave of westernisation in the book illustration of Persian classics under the Pahlavis seems to be more gentle. For example, in 1965 a very heavily illustrated *Bizhan and Manizheh* book was published in Tehran, and demonstrated quite a serious attempt of reconstruction of historical costumes and objects of applied art to be shown in the pictures. The whole group of artists was involved in this project, who produced sixty paintings to illustrate this ancient Parthian legend, which is considered to have been Ferdowsi's first story (pl.18). However, like in the medieval royal atelier, none of the artists was mentioned

by name but only as Laleh workshop (kargah-e honari-ye lale,)³⁸.

Sohrab from Tehranjeles

Such many-century uninterrupted interest in their rich and ancient cultural heritage seems to be the secret of survival through the social and political turmoil since the times immemorial, when according to the Shahnameh the Iranians were fighting the forces of evil in the shape of demons, dragons, witches, as well as Greek Alexander, Arab Zahhak and Sa'd b. Waqqas, or Turanian Afrasiyab, who become a part of the modern everyday life, helping shape if not mythological mentality an imaginative state of mind.

The recent decade-long heavy political and economic sanctions have increased the ideological tension between Iran and the West and triggered the revival of nationalism in the country as well as self-consciousness and self-esteem of those Iranians who live both in Iran and in the countries whose governments imposed the sanctions. Many successful businessmen of Iranian descent living abroad made serious efforts to dissociate themselves from the current ideology in Iran, which has been declared in the West the axis of evil. Such dissociation, however, strengthened their interest and support of both the ancient and contemporary Iranian art.

It has been indeed the rich and ancient cultural heritage combined with the ability of Iran to resist and counteract the pressure of the western sanctions that became a subject of special pride. It encouraged the Iranian emigres to keep the national identity through culture, supporting and promoting it for the sake of the second, and even third generations of the Iranians. Paradoxically, those who were born outside the country have already become the carriers of a different culture due to their host's linguistic milieu, which is not always friendly towards their farfetched motherland.

Such double identity makes those Iranians who settled down abroad, and especially those who were already born outside Iran close to those Shahnameh characters who, like Romeo and Juliet, were destined to find themselves in between two hostile camps. In the Shahnameh Iran is juxtaposed to its eternal enemy Turan, a collective symbol of the other. However, several key figures of the epic have their parents coming from both sides of the border: Sohrab, the son of the greatest Iranian hero Rostam and the Turanian princess Tahmineh from Samangan; Key Khosrow, the son of the Iranian prince the martyr Siyavush and the Turanian Princess Farangis, the daughter of the King of Turan, Afrasiyab; and most of all Siyavush, the ancient symbol of Iranian martyrdom. When he tried to escape troubles at the court of his father Key Kavus and the love-hatred of his step-mother Sudaba, he left Iran for Turan but was betrayed and executed. The Shahnameh image of Transoxanian Siyavush has the most ancient parallels in other cultures, like Ancient Egyptian Osiris, or Biblical Joseph that is associated with the cyclical cult of deity symbolising the dying and reviving of nature every spring. As mentioned above, the idea of the Shahnameh coincides with the idea of Iran, and goes far beyond the text of Ferdowsi's poem.

Nowadays this idea has already materialised into the whole existing multidimensional and multimedia world, which sparkles with the myriads of various facets: from rather

36. This publication (Shahnameh stories, London: Frances Lincoln, 2013) was made possible due to the support of the Parita and Siamak Bagheri.

37. Shahnameh stories, bilingual: Persian-English, Tehran: Bartarin, 1390

38. An abridged version of the Bizhan and Manizha. A story taken from the Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, Tehran, 1965.

traditional visual representations in book art and miniature painting to urban architectural designs, including sculptures and monuments, murals and the interiors of the Tehran metro stations, 3D images, photography, digital collages, comic books, films, including animation and video games³⁹, as well as theatre, music, opera, ballet, rap, hip-hop, fashion, jewellery, porcelain, carpets, etc. and their virtual and as well as digital versions.

It is inevitable that Ferdowsi's stories were and still are reinterpreted textually and visually. Every new staging of Shakespeare, although his words are preserved, is different. However, it is important to be able to know the original to appreciate its new interpretations. Iran is a country where the respect towards the national heritage is uniquely high. However, there are already quite a lot of Iranians who not only grew up but were born outside the country, but still feel exceptional attachment to its national heritage. For this reason the exhibitions, like the current one is of exceptional importance here in, Tehran and now, after the sanctions are lifted and the whole world is waiting for the revival of Iranian re-integration into the world economically and culturally. It is not only Rostam-2 who is expected to come back home, like a prodigal son after his 30 years of being abroad, but already Sohrab-2, who compared with Sohrab Kashani's Super Sohrab (pl. 31) is born in the hostile territory and returning to the land of ancestors. For such Sohrabs the exhibitions like this have a strong educational dimension in the most attractive form: free from medieval didacticism but challenging individual creativity at an emotional level, sometimes provoking, and most of the time encouraging them to think and offer their own interpretation of the ancient history of the country full of contemporary myths and legends.

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The exhibitions like this are to help develop the interest in this subject and the ability to distinguish between haut art and commercially oriented craft, between the artworks of, for example, Ossouli, Filizadeh and Neshat, and the photoshop designs of Rahmanian and Alango (pls.27 and 29).

The world of the Shahnameh is not a product of our days. It was born together with the epics, long before Ferdowsi, who together with Daqiqi and others turned a huge collection of Iranian folklore to the great versified chronicle of his nation starting from the creation of the humankind.

I would like to conclude this introduction to the richest topic on the modern visual Shahnameh not with words but with two pictures by Kambiz Derambakhsh. One depicts a man in a European suit who is trying to get rid of the old 'rubbish', swiping out of his life the images from the mediaeval manuscripts - warriors, horses, and flames, which recall the fire of the besieged fortresses, and even more so - of the iconic fire ordeal of Siyavush (pl.33). To make it more explicit, Derambakhsh attaches to the spear lying on the ground a misra' from Ferdowsi's story about Rostam and Isfandiyar. The second drawing shows that despite all the efforts of the man in the western suit and tie, he failed to lose his identity: a Safavid youth is still a part of his body and mind, which is much richer and joyous than

the empty desert behind the man in the suite (pl. 34), as his country is indeed the axis of ancient cultures including the *Shahnameh*, though not of evil. And it is time to restore the leaves of the book of ancient history, torn like in Aydin Aghdashloo's "Untitled" painted in 1979 (pl.35).

It is extremely plausible that the second exhibition after the London international show at the Prince's Gallery, solely dedicated to the idea of the *Shahnameh*, is now happening in Tehran and hosted by the famous Aaran Gallery - the place which introduced to the art world many young artists who are now among the greats.

Firuz Melville
4 February 2016
Pembroke College, Cambridge

39. Vít Šisler, 'Digital Heroes: Identity construction in Iranian video games', in: Cultural revolution in Iran. Contemporary popular culture in the Islamic Republic, eds. A. Sreberny and M. Torfeh, London, 59-80, 171-192.



1. Varahran V hunts with his slave girl, 6 century. Sasanian silver plate, State Hermitage Museum



2. Bahram Gur and Azada hunting, Ferdowsi Shahnameh, Royal Asiatic Society, Ms 239, f. 362v, Herat, 1444



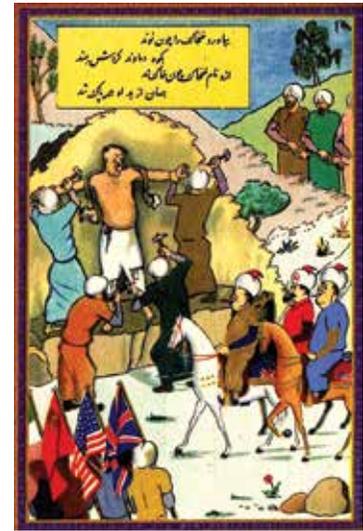
3. Abolhasan Seddighi and Hasanali Vaziri, Ferdowsi riding Simorgh, Tehran, 1933



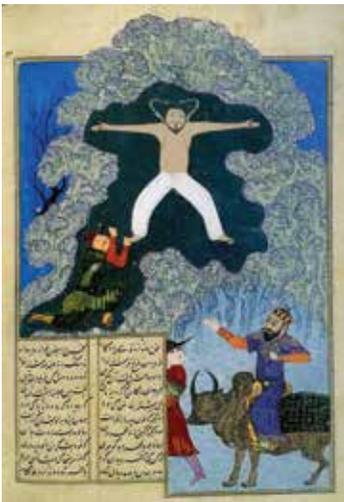
4. Sergey Feofanov, Ferdowsi riding Simorgh, 2015



5. Phoenix, Ilkhanid tile, 13 century, Chicago Art Institute



6. Kimon Evan Marengo, Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt watching Hitler-Mussolini-Hirohito being bound on the mountain, London, 1943



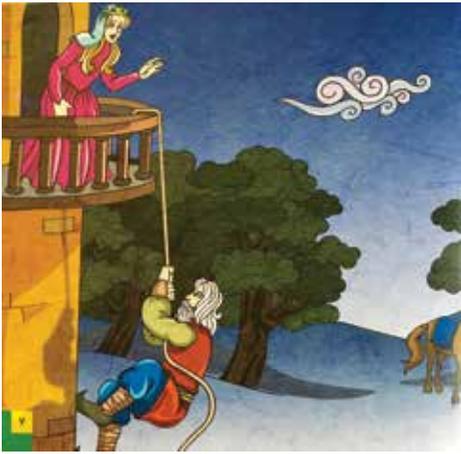
7. Feridun watching Zahhak being bound on the mountain Demavand, Ibrahim Sultan Shahnameh, Add. Ouseley 176, Shiraz, 1335, Bodleian Library, Oxford



8. Siamak Filizadeh, Without a shroud, 'Under Ground' series, 2014



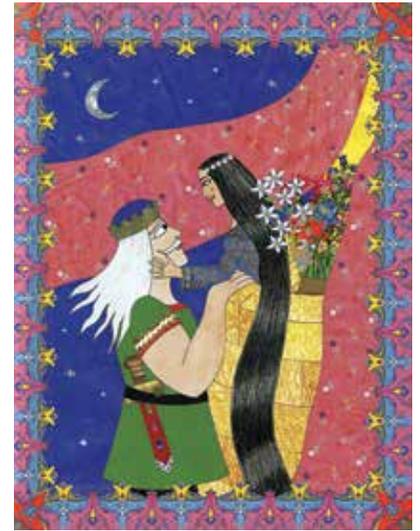
9. Shirin Neshat, Divine Rebellion, 'The Book of Kings' series, 2012



10. Peyman Soltani, Zal meets Rudabeh, 2012

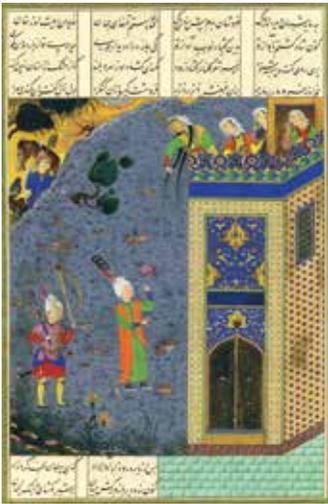


11. Shirin Aliabadi, Miss Hybrid 6, Tehran, 2008



12. Shirin Adl, Zal meets Rudabeh, 2013

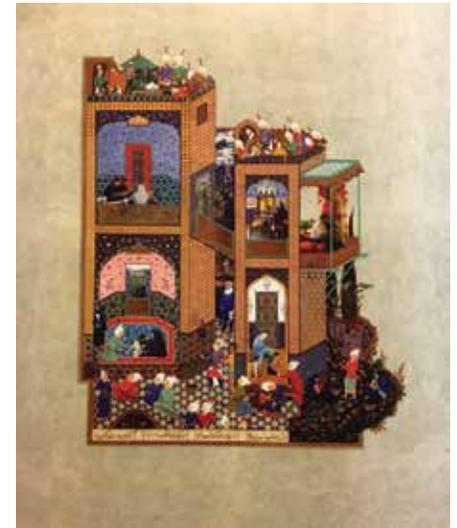
53



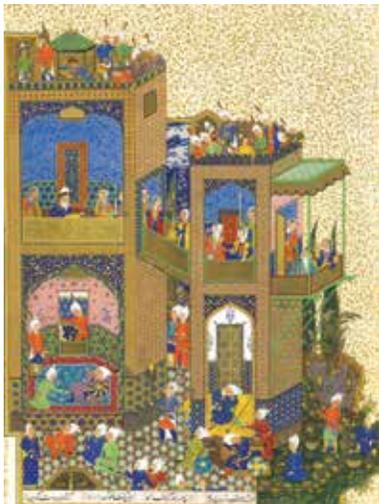
13. Attributed to Qadimi, Rudabeh makes a ladder of her tresses, Shah Tahmasp Shahnameh, Tabriz, f. 72v, 1524-1576, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



14. Zahra Hassan Agha, The Fall, 2010



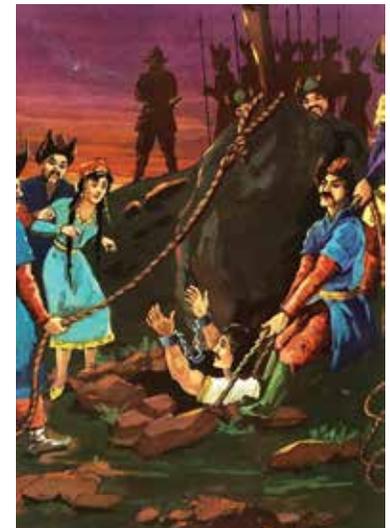
15. Soody Sharifi Love is in the air from 'Maxiatures' series, 2007



16. Attributed to Mir Musavvir, The nightmare of Zahhak, Shah Tahmasp Shahnameh, Tabriz, 28v, 1524-1576, Museum of Islamic Art, Doha



17. Veronica Shimanovskaya, Manizheh visits Bizhan in the pit, 2013



18. Rostam rescues Bizhan from the pit, Laleh workshop, Tehran, 1965



19. M. Moh, Manizheh invites Bizhan to her tent, Leningrad, Lomonosov (Imperial) Porcelain Factory, 1946



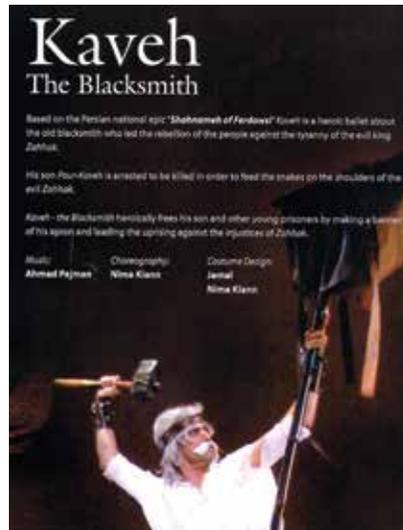
20. Vardges Surenyants, Ferdowsi reads his Shahnameh before Sultan Mahmud, 1913, National Gallery of Armenia



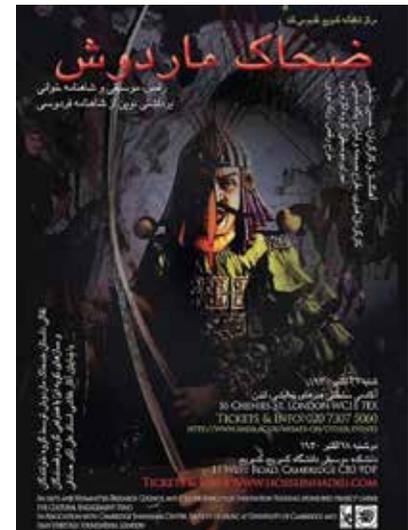
21. Victor Zabelin, Tahmina comes to Rostam in the middle of the night, St Petersburg, 2014



22. Irina Volkodaeva, Rostam giving Tahmineh an amulet before leaving for good, Moscow, 2015



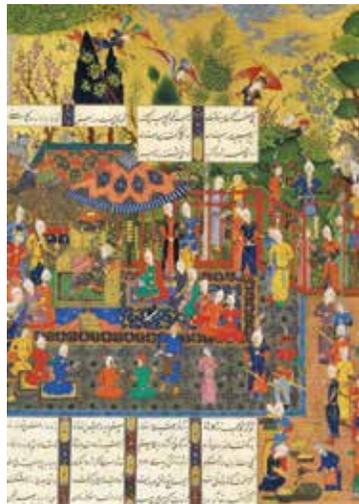
23. Kaveh, poster of the ballet, music by Ahmad Pejman, choreography by Nima Kian, 2004



24. Zahhak - the Dragon King of Persia, poster of the play by Hossein Hadisi, Cambridge, 2013



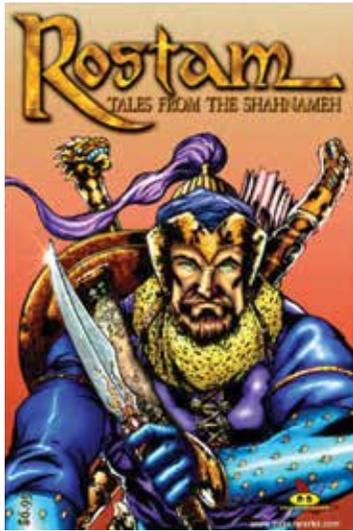
25. Kaveh's Banner, poster of the film by Bencion Kimyagarov, 1961



26. Attributed to Qadimi, Kaveh tears Zahhak's scroll, Shah Tahmasp Shahnameh, Tabriz, 31v, 1524-1576, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran



27. Aydin Salsabili, Rostam, 3D model, 2014



28. Rostam: Tales from The Shahnameh, comic book, Los Angeles: Hyperwerks, 2010

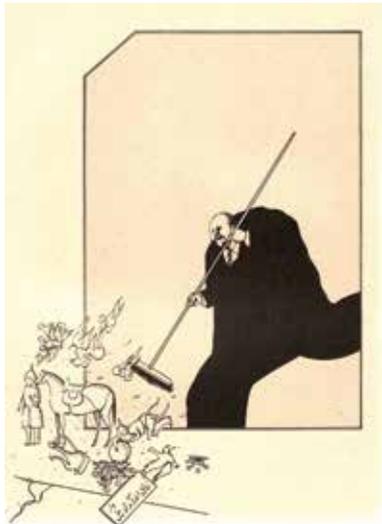


29. Sohrab Kashani, The Adventures of Super Sohrab, 'Super Sohrab' series, 2012.



30. Still from Sohrab's blood, from the series of "Rostam in Wonderland" by Pouya Afshar and Soroush Rezaee, 2012-3

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31. Kambiz Derambakhsh, Black Miniatures, 1973-5



32. Kambiz Derambakhsh, Black Miniatures, 1973-5



33. Aydin Aghdashloo's Untitled, Tehran, 1979



Shirin Adl, Key Kavus ascending the sky in flying machine, 2012



André Sevruguin, Key Kavus ascending the sky in flying machine, 1934

حسین حجار باشی زنجانى . نقش برجسته هاى دیوارهاى داخلى آرامگاه فردوسى . توس . ۱۳۴۷
Hossein Hajarbashi Zanjani . Reliefs on the interior walls of the tomb of Ferdowsi . Tous . 1968

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