
The Remaking Of Iran : Empire Of The Senses

By Martin Gayford

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In his long reign four centuries ago Shah Abbas presided over a great flowering of Persian art when his nation's power was at its height. As the British Museum continues its celebration of the history and culture of Iran with a show of work from the time, our writer sees Abbas's legacy at its most beautiful in his capital, Isfahan.

The bazaar at Isfahan has not changed much since it was built in the early 17th century. Nor, one would guess, have the wares on sale - a rich mixture of textiles, metalwork, ceramics, spices and Iranian sweets. One warm afternoon last October I was strolling through it with Neil MacGregor, the director of the British Museum, a group of museum staff, and journalists. After a day packed with visits to mosques, museums and monuments, MacGregor was on a mission to buy a carpet - and there are few better places in the world to do that than the Isfahan bazaar.

MacGregor and his museum are also embarked on a far bigger operation: to present the history and culture of Iran to the British public. In 2005, the BM presented *Forgotten Empire*, a highly successful show devoted to the ancient Persia of Cyrus and Xerxes. This spring it is following that with another, focusing on the late 16th and early 17th century: *Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*.

In a way it will present a version - enormously more precious and rare - of the goods on sale in the bazaar. There will be superb carpets, textiles, elaborately worked metal, paintings, elegantly written and profusely decorated Korans: a cornucopia, in fact, of the arts of the nation that we used to call Persia.

During his long reign Shah Abbas presided over a flowering of Iranian arts in a style as characteristic as that of the France of Louis XIV. This was carried from huge projects to the most delicate and refined of decorative work. Abbas I, sometimes known as Abbas the Great, reigned from 1587 to 1629. He was one of the great rulers of his age - the equal of the Ottoman Sultan, the Mogul Emperor or the King of Spain. In his epoch, Iranian power was at its highest point since classical times. He ruled territories stretching from the Tigris in present day Iraq to the Indus in Pakistan, and northwards into modern Georgia and Azerbaijan. In other words, a fair proportion of the headlines in today's newspapers are generated by places once governed by Shah Abbas.

Historically, Iran has always been a point of interchange between east and west - halfway down the Silk Road from China to Venice. Abbas's capital, Isfahan, was - and remains - a multicultural and multi-faith city.

In New Julfa, a suburb south of Isfahan across the Zayan deh river, there is a community of Armenian Christians. Abbas transported thousands of them forcibly from their homes in the original town of Julfa - then perilously close to the Ottoman frontier, now in modern Azerbaijan. It was worth moving the Armenians to Isfahan - and treating them with respect - because of their skills in silk weaving and trading.

The silk trade was crucial to the prosperity of Iran.

We had visited the Armenian cathedral before moving on to the bazaar. It is a quite extraordinary transcultural composite in which biblical scenes in a

European baroque style are, it seems, just stuck as if in a collage on top of the richly decorated tile work characteristic of 17th-century Isfahan.

MacGregor was fascinated by this example of art-history interfusion, delivering an eloquent and impromptu mini-lecture on the spot.

Those mosques and palaces, many built by Shah Abbas, make Isfahan by general acclamation one of the most beautiful cities on earth. Of the superb Sheik Lutfallah mosque, a few minutes' walk from the bazaar, the travel writer Robert Byron observed, 'I have never encountered splendour of this kind before.' Not even the Doge's Palace or Versailles, he thought, were so rich.

'Abbas was a real builder,' Sheila Voss, the curator, explains. 'In terms of architecture he was far greater than anyone who preceded him. The decoration of the great buildings²⁰and monuments, with marvellous vine scroll designs, carries over into the other arts. You see it on the domes of the mosques, but also on book bindings and in illuminations in manuscripts.'

Under Abbas a new style of carpet - called Polonaise - appeared, luxuriantly floral in decoration, featuring lotus blossoms and arabesques, and a palette of gold, peach and paler colours. The most sumptuous examples were woven in silk and gold (two will be on show in the exhibition).

At his court flourished one of the most talented of all Iranian painters, Reza (c1565-1635) - known, because of his close association with the shah, as Reza-yi Abbasi. Unlike much Islamic art, Persian miniatures are figurative, and in Reza's case show not only a flowing line but also a sharp observation of human character. 'His style,' Voss says, 'reflects the way people dressed, he painted the face of the moment. It's very modern.' In Reza's paintings we see the people and styles of Abbas's Persia: youths like fashion plates, opium-addicted ex-soldiers, ragged holy men.

To Iran from the east came the much-prized blue-and-white porcelain of China, which was collected in Persia and imitated by Iranian potters. Shah Abbas evidently suffered from the mania for acquiring porcelain - the Germans have a word for it, Porzellankrankheit, or 'porcelain sickness' - a century before it afflicted Europeans such as the Elector of Saxony (who once exchanged a regiment of dragoons for a selection of Chinese vases).

Abbas displayed his collection in the top storey of the entrance pavilion of his palace, known as the Ali Qapu, a short distance away from the bazaar down the immensely impressive square or maidan that Abbas built in Isfahan.

There you can still see vase- and bowl-shaped niches cut into an elaborate Islamic-style vault.

In its combination of energetic self-confidence and openness to the outside world, Shah Abbas's Iran, MacGregor believes, was like England in the same era. 'We all know about the Elizabethan moment of England being defined, opening to the world with a new sense of self. It's fascinating that Iran was doing exactly the same thing at exactly the same time.'

When Pietro della Valle, an Italian traveller, saw Shah Abbas in 1618, he was impressed by his energy: 'Whether he speak, he walk, or simply look at you, he has constantly the appearance of great animation and vivacity.' Sir John Malcolm,

a later British emissary to Iran, described the Shah's slightly ostentatious style of simplicity: 'Abbas was dressed in a plain dress of

red cloth. He wore no finery about his person; his sabre alone had a gold hilt... It was evident that the king, surrounded as he was with wealth and grandeur, affected simplicity.'

Abbas was ostentatiously pious. He is said to have walked hundreds of miles across the desert on a pilgrimage to the great Shia shrine at Mashhad. But his court was not a place of austere virtue.

'I think there's more austerity now than then,' Voss says. 'Abbas drank, he did what he wanted to do.' Thomas Herbert, a Jacobean visitor to his court, noted disapprovingly, 'Ganymede boys in vests of gold, rich bespangled turbans, and choice sandals, their curled hair dangling about their shoulders, with rolling eyes and vermilion cheeks.'

Even so, Abbas was not as self-indulgent as some of the later Safavid shahs.

'A lot of his successors were addicted to alcohol,' Voss says, 'and/or opium. I don't think Shah Abbas himself was particularly luxury-loving.'

He was too restless, too mercurial.'

Despite his many achievements, Abbas's reputation is stained by acts of cruelty. 'He was an autocrat,' Voss thinks, 'and really wanted control, and as he became older he became paranoid - which is why he blinded two of his sons and had another killed. Abbas also instituted the practice of locking up the royal princes in the palace grounds, where they were able to ride in the gardens and converse with their tutors but learnt little of the world.'

Those gardens were among the delights of Isfahan - and a few still remain. Thomas Herbert recalled that from a distance the city resembled a forest, 'so large, but withall so sweet and verdant that you may call it another paradise'. But a life spent in paradisaical gardens was a bad preparation for government. So Abbas was responsible both

for the glory and, eventually, the downfall of his dynasty, the Safavids. He and his family were descended from a medieval warrior and holy man, Sheikh Safi (hence the name). At the beginning of the 16th century Ismail I, the first Safavid shah, reunited the core territories of Iran after centuries of invasion and disintegration. He also proclaimed himself a Shia, not Sunni, Muslim. This changed Iran in a manner as fundamental as - and somewhat similar to - that in which Henry VIII altered English culture when he broke with Rome.

Shah Abbas's Iran was a Shia empire sandwiched between two Sunni super-powers, Ottoman Turkey and Mogul India. And just as it did in the case of Elizabeth's England and Catholic Spain, the religious difference deepened the political divisions.

Neil MacGregor thinks the parallel between Abbas's Iran and Elizabethan England is compelling. 'Both Abbas and Elizabeth I inherited a state that had recently changed its religious affiliation. Neither made that change, but each of them integrates that religious transformation into a central, core identity of the new state that they forge.'

The contacts between England and the Persia of Abbas were surprisingly close. When in Twelfth Night Sir Toby Belch observes, 'I will not give my part of this sport for a pension of thousands to be paid from the Sophy', he is talking about the Shah (to Elizabethans, 'the great Sophy'). Shakespeare's reference is to the gifts that the ruler of Persia had presented a pair of adventurers, Sir Robert and Sir Anthony Sherley, dispatched on a

diplomatic mission to Persia by the Earl of Essex. Sir Robert returned as Abbas's envoy and with a Circassian wife, Teresia, from Abbas's Caucasian realms. Both were painted in magnificent Persian costume by Van Dyck.

Abbas was interested in alliances with European powers. His greatest foe was the Ottoman Empire, so on the basis of 'my enemy's enemy', it made sense to regard Europeans as at least potential friends. Later in his reign he made common cause with the East India Company to eject the Portuguese from the island of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf.

Since then relations between the two countries have often been fraught - and are especially so at the moment. None the less, the show itself is proof of the close links between the British Museum and Iran. 'Exhibitions like this are possible,' MacGregor emphasises, 'only because of long friendly relations between the curators. One of the striking things about working with Iran is how well those friendships have flourished over the past 20 years, absolutely irrespective of whatever is going on politically.'

Though the Safavids' power crumbled within a century of the death of Abbas, the nation he regenerated has survived. 'Most recent discussion of Iran,' MacGregor thinks, 'has focused on the Islamic revolution of 1979.'

That has obscured the fact that this is a very old and stable state. The leadership has changed, but the modern Iranian state is still essentially the state that was conceived and shaped by Shah Abbas.'

One may abhor the policies and statements of the current Iranian government; one may find its nuclear facilities sinister and menacing. But that just makes it all the more crucial for us to understand Iran - an ancient and complex culture that contains, as Abbas himself did, many contradictions.

'Shah Abbas: The Remaking of Iran', in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation, is at the British Museum, London, from February 19 to June 14 (020-7323 8000; britishmuseum.org)
