

Media release | Zurich, November 2018

## **Shades of Elegance – Fashion and Fabrics in Teheran Around 1900**

---

23 November 2018 to 14 April 2019

**When the St Gallen merchant Emil Alpiger returned to Zurich in 1896, after more than twenty years in Teheran, his luggage included a wooden trunk full of Persian clothes and fabrics. According to Emil Alpiger's great-grandson, the trove was carefully looked after by the family across generations. Now, more than a hundred years later, the precious pieces are the focus of a special exhibition.**

When Emil Alpiger purchased the clothes, fabrics, wall hangings, and embroideries in the bazaar, they were brand new, which explains the fresh and rich colours. The astonishing combination of different patterns and designs is inspiring. It takes us back to Persia at the end of the nineteenth century, to an era we otherwise only know from old black-and-white photographs.

However, the clothes and fabrics stand for more than just the taste and love of colour of a foregone time and culture. They tell of industrial manufacture in Europe, of the search for new sales markets, and craving for exotic products among the bourgeois classes of Paris, London, and Zurich, but also of the displacement of traditional artisanry in Persia.

On the other hand, they also indicate how Iranian weavers and tailors embraced European fashion and foreign motifs and made them their own. The most striking examples include the short skirts worn by dancers of the Paris Ballet, the tutus, which were modified and worn by the ladies at the Shah's court according to their own taste, as early as 1873.

The same is true of Persian rugs and carpets. After the world exhibitions in London, Paris and Vienna had "globalized" public taste to some extent since 1851, oriental carpets became the latest craze. European companies like Philippe Ziegler from Manchester were quickly on the spot to satisfy the rising demand. It didn't take long for Emil Alpiger, who worked for Ziegler and Co., to adapt the designs to European taste. The carpets became larger and more colourful while, at the same time, the designs were "domesticated". In return, Iranian embroiderers began enriching their wall hangings with European motifs. What we have, in the end, on both sides, are cultural hybrids, globalized blends, oscillating between East and West. The works of art which, back then, captured the spirit of the time and are now waiting to be rediscovered, according to the motto: chic is shock.

Emil Alpiger, to whom we owe the collection, was both "culprit" and "keeper". In his younger years, he lived a life of adventure: by the age of twenty-eight he had travelled once around the world and founded two companies which, however, he soon gave up again. After that he managed the import-export business for Ziegler and Co. in Persia for more than twenty years. Apart from his business acumen, he also developed an active interest in the country and its people and acquired a substantial collection of textiles, ceramics, and weapons.

Today, in the much-evoked age of globalization, a look back to that era reveals a lot about our modern times. It tells of the unreflected striving for profit on the part of Western powers, of repression and exploitation, but it also indicates how much power lies hidden in the creative appropriation of "otherness".

**Exhibition curator**

---

Axel Langer, Near-Eastern Art, Museum Rietberg

**Further information:** [rietberg.ch/shadesofelegance](http://rietberg.ch/shadesofelegance)

**MEDIA CONTACTS**

---

**Elena DelCarlo**

Head of Marketing & Communications

Tel. +41 44 415 31 27

[elena.delcarlo@zuerich.ch](mailto:elena.delcarlo@zuerich.ch)

**Alain Suter**

Communications & Cooperations

Tel. +41 44 415 31 34

[alain.suter@zuerich.ch](mailto:alain.suter@zuerich.ch)

**Media texts and images for editorial purposes:** [rietberg.ch/press](http://rietberg.ch/press)