

## Press release

### The Fascination of Persia

Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art  
& Contemporary Art of Tehran

27 September 2013 to 12 January 2014

**With 'The Fascination of Persia', Museum Rietberg presents a special exhibition about Persia/Iran and its rich and complex relationship with Europe. The show, which includes some 200 works, concentrates on three themes: the fascination with Persia among artists in Baroque Europe, the engagement with European images in Safavid Persia (1590–1720), and contemporary art from Tehran.**

When Europe and Persia began to establish closer contacts with each other more than four hundred years ago, new relations between them developed at a diplomatic, economic and artistic level. Persia and Europe met on an equal footing. Embassies were sent to and fro, in the hope of initiating joint action against the powerful Ottoman Empire, which was then a constant cause of concern for both Europe and the Safavid Empire. At the same time the trade in Persian silk was holding out the prospect of large profits. The East India Companies of the Netherlands and England vied for privileges at the court of Isfahan, then the Persian capital, and opened trading posts in Persia. French *fratres* settled in New Julfa, the Armenian quarter of Isfahan, and gradually artists, adventurers, jewellers, clockmakers and various other artisans all made their way to far-off Persia. Among them was Johann Rudolf Stadler from Zurich, the personal clockmaker of Shah Safi I, who was executed in 1637 in Isfahan. One of the many accounts of his dramatic fate was written by the famous Huguenot diamond trader and traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who purchased the barony and castle of Aubonne in today's canton of Waadt with the fortune that he had made in Persia.

Although the political and economic ambitions on both sides fell short of initial expectations, the mutual exchange left lasting traces in both European and Persian art.

In the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, precious silk sashes woven with gold, silver and silver-gilt thread were highly prized and became an enduring feature of the national dress. At that time the dual state was not only one of the largest European nations in terms of territory, but it also occupied a special cultural position between West and East. Since the Polish aristocracy considered itself as descended from the Sarmatians, a former eastern Iranian people, they clothed and armed themselves in oriental style and decorated their houses with Persian carpets and fabrics. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, painters – above all Rembrandt (1606–1669) and his disciples – discovered the 'Persian' as an indispensable figure for their biblical history paintings and also began enthusiastically producing orientalisising half-length portraits of their fellow citizens for which the latter posed in turbans. Persian clothing held a strong and lasting appeal for European artists. Aegidius II Sadeler (1560–1629), who worked at the court of Emperor Rudolf II, or Richard Greenbury (active 1616–1650), for example, created portraits of sumptuously clad envoys of the Isfahan court. In France, painters such as Nicolas de Largillière (1656–1746) and several copper engravers found great delight in the exotic appearance of the Persian ambassador, whose visit to Louis XIV in 1715 was the talk of Paris and Versailles for many months afterwards.

Persian painters, for their part, discovered the young man in European clothing as an erotic subject for their paintings. With similar enthusiasm, Reza 'Abbasi (active around 1590–1635), Afzal al-Tuni (active at the time of Shah 'Abbas II, r. 1642–1666) and Muhammad Qasim (d. 1659) turned to female nudes which they had first encountered in European engravings. Their depictions range from unselfconscious innocence to undisguised sensuality. The Late Safavid artists Muhammad Zaman (active 1649–1700) and 'Aliquli Jabadar (active 1657–1716?) developed a new 'Frankish' style which adopted European techniques and themes. The final stage of this development were large-format oil paintings in which female cup-bearers, bodyguards, Armenians and masters of ceremonies are shown in sumptuous interiors which are filled with European luxury objects. Both the whole-figure paintings as well as the miniatures in 'European' manner would have a lasting influence on Persian art in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Unlike in the 17th century, artists today from north, south, east and west meet regularly at biennales all over the world. It is no coincidence that so many of their different art works share a concern with the phenomenon of globalisation, which makes things more similar to each other and so comparable. Thus the system of torture in the work of the artist Parastou Forouhar (b. 1962) is not based on Iranian sources only, but derives from the ancient dualism between good and evil. The windows of calamity that the visual mass media open on to future events are shown by Rozita Sharafjahan (b. 1962) in a film which consists of countless sequences from old Iranian cinema, which already anticipate the violence of the Islamic revolution. The same theme is examined by the artist Nazgol Ansarinia (b. 1979). She gives a three-dimensional form to murals which the Iranian state has commissioned. Now these paintings physically penetrate into the real architecture and sum up the abysses of the present. The artist Farhad Fozouni (b. 1979) also interrogates the worldview prescribed by the state. In his drawings he merges his own body with public space and thus creates impossible, uncanny fusions. A different approach to the same topic is taken by the new film of Samira Eskandarfar (b. 1980). Although it derives its formal power from historical melodrama, in reality it is a dark and negative fairy tale which does not offer even an illusion of redemption. The power of storytelling also continues in the *Chelgis* series of Mandana Moghaddam (b. 1962). Each of her works transforms a folk myth which depicts women in a backward role, into images of violence and strength from which resistance grows. Finally, the artist Hamed Sahihi (b. 1980) describes the revolt of the intimate: in order to exist, the lovingly painted figures in his stop motion films completely blot out the oppressive demands of their surroundings.

With this pioneering exhibition, curators Axel Langer and Susann Wintsch open up an important but almost unknown chapter in the story of Persian-European relations. At the same time they build a bridge into the present, for Europe's relationship to Persia/Iran was not always as fraught as it is today, with stereotypes dominating our images of the country and our media focusing only on Islam(ism), nuclear politics and economics. 'The Fascination of Persia' shows what was once there and offers a challenging view of what is there now.

#### Catalogue

*The Fascination of Persia: Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art & Contemporary Art of Tehran*, edited by Axel Langer, Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess / Museum Rietberg Zürich. Paperback, 320 pages, over 300 colour illustrations, 24 x 33 cm. CHF 59

English edition: ISBN 978-3-85881-739-6

German edition: ISBN 978-3-85881-396-1

Supported by the Vontobel Foundation

## Lesungen im Rahmen von «Zürich liest'13» (in German only)

---

Fr, 25. Oktober 2013, 18h

**Nurudin Farah liest aus «Gekapert»**

mit Ilija Trojanow (Moderation)

Sa, 26. Oktober 2013, 18h

**Mana Neyestani liest aus «Ein iranischer Alptraum»**

An beiden Tagen findet jeweils um 16.30h eine Führung durch die Ausstellung statt als Einstimmung auf die Lesung (für Festivalbesucher im Eintritt inbegriffen). Programm: [www.zuerich-liest.ch](http://www.zuerich-liest.ch)

## Klangkunst Teheran

---

Fr, 15. November 2013, 20h

**ZKO – Zürcher Kammerorchester**

Musik für Streichquartette und Ney von Reza Vali und Maddalena Sirmen Lombardini

Sa, 16. November 2013, 20h

**Nour-Ensemble aus Teheran**

Gregorianische Choräle und spanische Cantigas treffen auf traditionelle persische Musik

## Vorlesung an der Volkshochschule (in German only)

---

**«Sehnsucht Persien: Kunst im europäisch-persischen Dialog»**

Programm und Anmeldung: [www.vhszh.ch](http://www.vhszh.ch)

## Öffentliche Führungen (in German only)

---

*Angebote für Erwachsene:*

**Öffentliche Führungen** jeweils Mittwoch, 18h, Donnerstag 12.15h, Sonntag 11h

**Öffentliche Führungen mit Gebärdendolmetscher/in**

Mi, 16. Oktober, 18h; So, 27. Oktober, 11h

Mi, 20. November, 18h; Mi, 18. Dezember, 18h

**Private Führungen** Tel. +41 44 206 31 11 / 31

**Führungen mit dem Kurator Axel Langer und der Kuratorin Susann Wintsch**

Do, 3. Oktober, 18h; Do, 24. Oktober, 18h; Do, 7. November, 18h;

Do, 5. Dezember, 18h; Do, 9. Januar, 18h

*Workshops für Erwachsene, Kinder und Familien:*

So, jeweils 11–16h

**Offene Werkstatt** (ab 5 Jahren)

«Persisch-europäisches Klappbüchlein»

Mi, 2. Oktober 2013 oder 8. Januar 2014, 15–16h

**Geschichtenstunde für alle**

«Vor langer, langer Zeit...»

So, 10. November 2013, 10–12.30h

**Kinderworkshop** (ab 7 Jahren)

«Tausendundein Teppich»

So, 10. November 2013, 14–16.30h

**Familienworkshop** (ab 5 Jahren)

«Tausendundein Teppich»

Mi, 20. November 2013, 14–16.30h

**Workshop für Grosseltern und Enkelkinder** (ab 5 Jahren)

«Tausendundein Teppich»

---

**Information and contact**

Information, texts and images for media use, see [www.rietberg.ch](http://www.rietberg.ch)

**Museum Rietberg Zürich**

Gablerstrasse 15

CH-8002 Zürich

T. +41 44 206 31 31, Infoline +41 44 206 31 00

F. + 41 44 206 31 32

[www.rietberg.ch](http://www.rietberg.ch)

[museum.rietberg@zuerich.ch](mailto:museum.rietberg@zuerich.ch)

**Opening hours**

Tue–Sun 10–17h

Wed, Thu 10–20h

**Admission**

*Special exhibition*

Adults CHF 18 | concessions CHF 14

Children 16 and under free

*Collection*

2013: free admission to the collections

**Directions**

Tram no. 7 (towards Wollishofen), stop 'Museum Rietberg' (4 stops from Paradeplatz).

No parking except disabled parking