

Transforming Traditions: the Arts of 19th Century Iran A Country at the Crossroads Between Tradition and Transformation



Portrait of Prince Abu'l Fath Mirza Salar al-Dawla (1881-1961)

Taken by Antonin Sevruguin

Iran, 1900-1930: Image credit: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of A. Katherine Dennis Smith, 1973–1985, FSA_A.4_2.12.GN.36.11

Toronto, August 27, 2018 *Transforming Traditions: the Arts of 19th Century Iran* brings together a fascinating selection of masterpieces, many on loan from the Louvre Museum, created under the Qajar dynasty between 1785 and 1925. The exhibition, opening at the Aga Khan Museum on September 22, aims to highlight the complex dynamics that impacted the arts of a society at a crossroads between tradition and transformation during a century of unprecedented change.

Caught between the desire to maintain time-honoured local traditions and the increasing necessity to engage with ever more pervasive outside influences and currents of innovation, the arts of 19th century Iran tell powerful stories. They speak of the persistence and conscious revival of Persian traditions. At the same time, they reveal how newly imported 'western-style' art forms and technologies, like lithography and photography, not only transformed but transcended traditions and often ushered in completely unprecedented artistic departures.

"A play on words, the exhibition title refers to artistic traditions that were transformed by the complex realities in Iran at the time," says Henry Kim, Director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum. "We consider *Transforming Traditions* a case study for the arts of any society that must navigate change and cultural currents. Some societies are able to revive local traditions and convictions, others enthusiastically adapt state-of-the-art ideas and technologies. Many represent a successful fusion of tradition and the latest contemporary trends."

“The purpose of *Transforming Traditions – The Arts in 19th Century Iran* is not simply to present a host of beautiful artifacts, but to provide thought-provoking insights into a dynamic, creative, and sophisticated country much constricted by turbulent realities and western misperceptions – then as today,” says Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, Director of Collections and Public Programs.

This exhibition brings together rare portraits, paintings, lacquerware, lithographed manuscripts, photography, ceramic tiles, musical instruments, and textiles from a host of international and national collections. Masterpieces from the Aga Khan Museum will be featured alongside a major loan from the Louvre Museum and select items from other institutions including the musée du quai Branly, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the Museum of Fine Arts – Houston, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Textile Museum of Canada, McGill University Library’s Rare Books and Special Collections, and private collections, among others.

Highlights from the exhibition include:

- An oil painting depicting Fath ‘Ali Shah enthroned. He was the first Persian ruler to take full advantage of large-scale portraits as symbols of power. He commissioned the painting, which shows him seated on his jeweled throne, as a diplomatic gift for Napoleon I.
- A bookbinding from the late 18th to early 19th century, painted and lacquered with flowers and birds, which were common themes in Persian mystical poetry. This more naturalistic style was inspired by European engravings and botanical manuals.
- The rulers of 19th-century Iran were inspired by European systems of military hierarchy and decoration. This is reflected in a medallion that takes its star shape from British and French designs and its lion and sun theme from Iranian royal symbols going back to pre-Islamic times.
- Painted and lacquered artworks of all kinds were popular in mid-1800s Iran, but an exhibition highlight is a mirror case which shows a scene – a mother and child surrounded by angels – that echoes Christian themes and is painted in a European style.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a diverse series of events, and public programs.

Transforming Traditions runs from September 22, 2018 to February 10, 2019 at the Aga Khan Museum. For more information, visit agakhanmuseum.org.

The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada, has been established and developed by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), which is an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The Museum’s mission is to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Muslim civilizations have made to world heritage while often reflecting, through both its permanent and temporary exhibitions, how cultures connect with one another. Designed by architect Fumihiko Maki, the Museum shares a 6.8-hectare site with Toronto’s Ismaili Centre, which was designed by architect Charles Correa. The surrounding landscaped park was designed by landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic.

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