



# FRANCE XI. PERSIAN ART AND ART COLLECTIONS IN FRANCE

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## FRANCE

### xi. PERSIAN ART AND ART COLLECTIONS IN FRANCE

French collections, both public and private, contain hundreds of Persian works of art. Some of these reached France during the Middle Ages, notably after the Crusades, and were kept in the treasures of several churches around the country. But most of the great collections containing Persian art were created during the second half of the 19th century. These contain the main public collections, such as the Louvre, the Musée des arts décoratifs, the Musée de la céramique de Sèvres, and the manuscripts catalogued in the *Supplément* section of the Persian manuscript collection at the Bibliothèque nationale. Some provincial museums also contain interesting items, sometimes arranged in a thematic collection, as in the Musée des tissus in Lyon. The interest in Persian art is also demonstrated in the number of public exhibitions which have been held in Paris; including those of 1912 (Marteau and Vever), 1938 (Corbin), 1948 (*Iran: pièces du musée de Téhéran*), 1961 (*Sept mille ans d'art en Iran*), 1973 (Mélikián, 1973).

At the turn of this century, some of the finest private collections of Oriental and Islamic art were to be found in France, although later these collections were split up and largely scattered around the world. The art market dealing



with Islamic art is well represented in Paris, but not on the same scale as that in London.

*Church treasuries.* The trade of luxury goods, active in antiquity, continued the import of Oriental objects into Europe in the Middle Ages. This trade concerned mainly textiles, which were light and easy to transport, as well as objects in gold and silver. Thus, the so-called “Cup of *Ḳosrow*” is a magnificent piece of Sasanian *orfèvrerie* which had been kept since the Middle Ages in the treasury of the cathedral of Saint-Denis (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 203). This cup was part of a rich collection which also housed some masterpieces from Islamic times, such as the ivory chess piece called “de l’échiquier de Charlemagne,” probably of Indian origin (*Trésor de Saint-Denis*, no. 18). The Cup of *Ḳosrow*, now in the Cabinet des médailles (part of the Bibliothèque nationale), is made of gold set in cloisonné-work with a cut rock crystal showing a king enthroned and surrounded by garnets and green colored glass pieces. Datable to the 6th or 7th century, it has been attributed successively to *Ḳosrow* I, *Ḳosrow* II and even *Kavād* I (*Trésors d’Orient*, 1973, no. 226, pp. 86-88). Another Sasanian object, a rock crystal vase, known as the “Vase d’Aliénor” was also kept in this treasury (*Trésor de Saint-Denis*, no. 27) and is now in the Louvre (MR 340).

Among the many works of art housed in the treasuries of French churches and cathedrals, oriental textiles occupy an important place. A silk fragment known as the “Shroud of Saint Bertrand,” is housed in the Crypt of Notre Dame de la Couture in Le Mans. This textile, dated 9th-10th century, is very much in the Sasanian style of other textiles of the period, but its provenance is uncertain. Another fragment woven in silk, the so-called “Shroud of Saint-Josse” is, however, unquestionably Persian (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 982) and bears the name of *Abū Manṣūr Boḳtegīn*, a Turkish governor of Khorasan who died in 350/961. Now in the Louvre, this textile was kept in the reliquary of Saint Josse, in Pas-de-Calais and was probably brought back from the Near East by Etienne de Blois, brother of Godefroy de Bouillon, after the first Crusade (*Arts de l’Islam des origines à 1700 dans les collections publiques françaises*, no. 228, pp. 168-69; *Survey of Persian Art*, pp. 2002-3). Other Oriental textiles, possibly of Persian origin, are kept in the cathedral at Sens and in the Benedictine abbey at Jouarre (*Trésors sacrés*, no. 3). Important carpets were also preserved in churches; for example the “Tapis de Mantes,” a large Safavid carpet dating back to the end of the 16th century, that was used on important occasions in the Collegiate Church of Notre Dame, Mantes. Since 1912 it has been preserved



in the Louvre (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1127).

*Public collections.* 1. The Musée du Louvre, Paris. The famous collections housed at the Louvre are of very different origins. Thus, a Timurid jade cup dated c. 1450-1500 (Lentz and Lowry, p. 226) entered the personal collections of Louis XIV between 1684 and 1701 (Lentz and Lowry, p. 355). With the development of archaeological excavations in Persia, and particularly those at Susa, the museum acquired a number of Elamite, pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid objects, as well as important pieces of early Islamic period. A large part of the outstanding pieces of Persian art of the Islamic era was acquired through the sales of great private collections, such as Goupil's, in 1888. The Louvre has an active acquisition policy that attempts to complete the collections of the museum and retain in France the remains of the important private collections.

Several agreements have been made between Persia and France for the acquisition of antiquities, such as one in 1900, between Foreign Minister Théophile Delcassé and Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah (*La Perse et la France*, no. 206). Marcel-Auguste Dieulafoy (q.v.) directed the excavations at Susa from 1884 to 1886, followed in 1897 by Jacques de Morgan. The most famous findings by Dieulafoy are the glazed ceramic wall decorations from Susa. The magnificent archers' frieze was heavily restored by him; and it is difficult to imagine today that most of the heads of these figures were entirely reconstituted with inspiration from the Persepolis reliefs. Besides the ten archers' ensemble, other glazed panels from the Susa palaces are on exhibit, such as that of a griffin or a winged-bull, as well as two sphinx with the Mazdean winged-disk. The excavations in Susa also brought to light important sculptures, painted or glazed ceramics and bronzes from the Elamite period (see ELAM vi). Of interest for the history of pottery, and coming from the same site, are the first Islamic faiences, with their characteristic blue and white decoration. A special exhibition of the new findings from Susa was held in Paris in 1930 (*Fouilles de Tello*), at a time when the museum lacked space to house these artifacts. With the recent enlargement of exhibition space, a full display of the art of pre-Islamic Iran has been made possible. Other pre-Islamic pieces come from fortuitous finds, such as a gold cup from north-west Persia, dated 13th-10th century B.C.E. (Porada, p. 88). The Louvre also possesses representative items of Sasanian art, such as a bronze bust of a Sasanian king (Ghirshman, 1951, pl. XVI), stucco plaques (Porada, p. 216), and mosaics coming from the palaces of Bišāpūr (Ghirshman, 1956).



It must be noted that the results of the French archaeological expeditions in pre-Islamic sites from Afghanistan (Ball and Gardin) are housed in the Guimet Museum and not in the Louvre. These concern mainly the late Hellenistic and Greco-bactrian sculptures from Haḍḍa, Fondoqestān (q.v.) and Gandhāra, as well as some ivory fragments and the superb glass goblet from Begrām (q.v.).

The creation of an Islamic section in the Louvre dates back to 1890, mainly thanks to the donation of Alexandre-Charles Sauvageot (1856), and the interest shown by the curators of the *Objets d'art* department, Emile Molinier and Gaston Migeon (Bernus-Taylor, p. 7). Other gifts or bequests (Raymond Koechlin, Alphonse Kann, Alexandre Chompret, Jacques Matossian, Georges Marteau) also contributed to the formation of the collections, reflecting the taste for oriental objects fashionable at the turn of the century. However, from 1971 to 1993, the Islamic collections were not on permanent display. During this time, some exhibitions were held (*Arts de l'Islam*, 1971; *L'Islam dans les collections nationales*, 1977; *Arabesques*, 1989) which allowed the public to see some of the major Islamic works of art, although for limited periods only. Fortunately, with the opening of the new galleries in 1993, a selection of the museum's best pieces are now on display, along with a temporary loan from the Musée des arts décoratifs. The Musée des arts décoratifs started its collection of Persian art in 1884. It was in this museum, in 1903, that the first large exhibition of Islamic art was held (Méliikian, 1973, p. 2). On the occasion of the opening of the Islamic art gallery in the Louvre, a practical handbook written by Marthe Bernus-Taylor, *conservateur général* of this section, was issued (Bernus-Taylor, 1993).

Thanks to the Susa findings, the Louvre has a rich collection of Persian ceramics, especially from the early Islamic period. Among other important early Islamic pieces is the large plate with black Kufic calligraphy over a white slip (Louvre AA96; illustrated in Bernus-Taylor, p. 35; *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 560A), probably from 10th century Samarqand, or the plates dated 10th-11th century, from Khorasan (MAO 858 and 859; illustrated in Bernus-Taylor, pp. 36-37). The so-called *mīnā'ī* or *haft-rangī* as well as luster decorated ceramics are also well-represented, the latter by the remarkable water-jug dating from the beginning of 13th century. The *mīnā'ī* cup with a horseman is a peculiar example of both luster and *mīnā'ī* techniques used together in a single piece (MAO 440; illustrated in Bernus-Taylor, p. 53).

There are several noteworthy metal objects from the Saljuq period in the Louvre, including a bronze lion incense-burner (Khorasan, 11th-12th century;



Melikian, 1973, p. 17; *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1297, Bernus-Taylor, p. 61 ) and a copper candle-stick decorated with a frieze of ducks (Khorasan, 12th-13th century). Another item in the same collection is a star-tile panel in luster decoration made in Kāšān for the Emāmzāda Ja‘far in Dāmḡān and dated 665/1267 (*Survey of Persian Art*, p. 1679; **PLATE I**).

Timurid metal-work is represented by a candle-stick bearing the name of Tīmūr, which was made in 799/1396-97 for the shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī in Turkestan (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1373A). This candle-stick with the base missing is part of a set of six pieces which were originally made for the shrine. Four of them are still in Turkestan, the sixth is at the Hermitage, in Saint-Petersburg (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1373B; Bernus-Taylor, p. 94; Melikian, 1973, p. 83; Lentz and Lowry, pp. 30 and 329).

As for the Safavid period, one of the outstanding items, the large “Tapis de Mantes” has already been mentioned. Another interesting piece from this period is a *kilim* from Kāšān, dating from the end of the 16th or beginning of the 17th century, depicting, in a central medallion, Bahrām Gōr fighting the dragon, with Laylā and Majnūn in the corners (illustration, Bernus-Taylor, p. 102; **PLATE II**). Also worth mentioning is the fritware dish from the Musée des arts décoratifs, which uses a peculiar technique of decoration. The motif is cut through a beautiful cobalt-blue slip covered with a transparent glaze so that it has the color of paste. This kind of ceramic, apparently very rare (about five pieces have been published), may have come from Kermān, and was made sometime between 1620-40 (Soustiel and David, 1991, no. 125). A big tile panel in *cuerda-seca* polychrome decoration depicts outdoor festivities in the style of Reżā ‘Abbāsī; it probably comes from a 17th century pavilion in Isfahan.

The Qajar period is perhaps the least represented in the Louvre. The main item from this period is a portrait of Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah on the throne by Mehr-‘Alī (lent by Musée de Versailles), which was given in 1806 to Pierre-Amédée Jaubert, Napoleon’s ambassador in Persia (*Camb. Hist. Iran VII*, pl. 14b).

Only loose leaves of Persian paintings and calligraphies are kept in the Louvre, manuscripts being preserved at the Bibliothèque nationale. Thus, three pages of the famous so-called “Demotte” *Šāh-nāma* (q.v.) were given by Georges Marteau in 1916. A beautiful tinted drawing by Moḥammadī, dated 986/1578 also comes from Marteau’s donation. The illustrated page from a lost manuscript of *Homāy o Homāyūn*, from the Musée des arts décoratifs (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 879) is “one of the most celebrated of Timurid paintings”



(Lentz and Lowry, p. 336). The beautiful portrait of Shah ‘Abbās with a *sāqī*, painted by Moḥammad-Qāsem in 1037/1627 was acquired in 1975. It seems to be the only one painted in Persia during the lifetime of the shah (Bernus-Taylor, p. 133; for a general discussion of Shah ‘Abbās’ portraits, see Grube and Sims). A page from a large Safavid *fāl-nāma* (q.v.) is one of the more recent acquisitions by the Louvre (Soustiel and David, 1992a, no. 117; (PLATE IV). A large show-case displays about fifty pieces from the Safavid period, such as the plate decorated with a *kh’i-lin* (late 16th century), a luster-decorated bottle (17th century), and a lavender-blue *qalyān*, painted in white slip (PLATE V).

4. The Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. The formation of the Persian manuscript section in the Bibliothèque nationale goes back to the reign of Louis XIV. There were no Persian manuscripts in the library before 1660. However, less than a century later, the catalogue of the manuscripts in the Royal Library (*Catalogus codicum manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Regiae* I, Paris 1739) already included 388 Persian manuscripts which constitute the *Ancien fonds* (Richard, 1989, p. 1; 1997, pp. 224-25). The impulse for the creation of the École des langues orientales, as well as the funds to buy manuscripts, can probably be traced to Colbert, during the period from 1661 to 1684. Among the famous collectors of oriental manuscripts of the time were Nicolas Fouquet (1615-80), Cardinal Mazarin (1602-61) and Antoine Galland (1646-1715), the translator of *The Arabian Nights*. It must be borne in mind that not all the manuscripts in Persian were of Persian origin, many of them being Indian or Turkish copies of Persian texts. Edgar Blochet’s (q.v.) *Catalogue des manuscrits persans de la Bibliothèque nationale*, (4 vols, Paris, 1905-34) included 2481 entries. Francis Richard has undertaken a revision of the catalogue: the first volume, concerned with the *Ancien fonds*, has been published (Richard, 1989) and he is currently preparing the *Supplément persan* which includes Persian manuscripts which were acquired by the library from 1740 to the present.

The Bibliothèque nationale possesses some celebrated Persian illustrated manuscripts. The copy of the *Ketāb al-deryāq* (dated 595/1199), an illustrated Arabic text, is regarded as an important landmark in the history of Islamic painting (Ettinghausen, pp. 83-86). Its provenance remains controversial, although in the opinion of one art historian, its Persian origin is beyond dispute (Mélikian, 1967).

The oldest illustrated manuscript made for the library of Sultan Aḥmad Jalāyer is a copy of Moḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad Ṭūsī Salmānī’s *‘Ajā’eb al-maklūqāt* (q.v.) made in Baghdad in 790/1388 (*Suppl. Pers.* 332; Gray, pp. 45-48,



Richard 1997, p. 71). An illustrated copy of the *Jāme' al-tawārīk* of Rašīd-al-Dīn, made for Bāysonğor (q.v.) in Herat around 1430 (*Suppl. Pers.* 1113), contains 113 illustrations by several artists. Although written in Arabic, the copy of the *Ketāb šowar al-kawākeb al-tābeta* (The book on the constellations of the fixed stars; MS Arabe 5036) by 'Abd-al-Raḥmān b. 'Omar Šūfī (q.v.), made for Uluğ Beg around 1437, is a jewel of the Timurid art of the book. The copy contains 74 illustrations, probably made in Herat or Samarqand (Lentz and Lowry, pp. 152-53, 168-69 and 340). A splendid *Kamsa* of Neẓāmī dated 1620-24 (*Suppl. Pers.* 1029) contains 34 paintings, two of them signed by an otherwise unknown artist, Ḥaydarqolī Naqqāš. This copy was probably made in Bāğbād (Turkmenistan) and Isfahan for a member of Shah 'Abbās' entourage (Richard, 1995, pp. 92-94; 1997, p. 219). Other important paintings and calligraphies are kept in the form of albums (*moraqqa's*) such as *Suppl. Pers.* 1171, or *Arabe* 6076, which contain fine specimens of Safavid painting.

Located on the premises of the Bibliothèque nationale is the Cabinet des Médailles, which houses the already-mentioned Cup of Ƙosrow. Besides an impressive collection of coins and seals of different periods, the Cabinet also displays other masterpieces of Sasanian art, such as a silver plate with a royal hunting scene attributed to Yazdegerd III (Ghirshman, 1951, pl. XV; *Trésors d'Orient*, no. 227) or the cameo commemorating the victory of Šāpūr I over Valerian (B.N., Méd., Babelon, Cat. no. 360; *Trésors d'Orient*, no. 225).

*Provincial museums.* Some provincial libraries also keep Persian manuscripts. Thus, the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire in Strasbourg has 32 Persian manuscripts (Hoghoughi); four of them illustrated (Bourgeois, Pls. IX-XII), to which a *moraqqa'* with calligraphies and paintings must be added (Piemontese).

The Musée historique des tissus in Lyon was founded in 1890. It was perhaps The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London that inspired the Lyon industrialists to create a historical museum with textiles from different parts of the world. The collection contains an important section on pre-Islamic textiles, including many Sasanian fragments. Most of these come from excavations at Antinoë in Egypt. Jean Pozzi's donation to the museum in 1971 included 1400 textiles, among which 800 are Persian. These comprise seven Buyid fragments, along with numerous pieces from the 17th and 18th centuries, as well as carpets from Senneh and Khorasan (Martiniani-Reber; Sano, 1976). The donation also included several Persian ceramics.



The Musée Adrien Dubouché in Limoges has some interesting pieces of Persian ceramics including a *qalyān* base in the shape of a cat, made in Kermān in the 17th century and a large vase with polychrome decoration (Kermān, late 17th century). Many other regional museums own oriental objects; they are mostly badly catalogued and seldom on display (Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence, Musée Grobet-Labadié in Marseille, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Narbonne, among others).

Rarely displayed, the collections of Islamic art in the French central regions are unknown to the public; moreover, the history of the provenance and acquisition of their pieces are poorly documented. Arms and weapons, mainly Qajar, are probably best represented in these collections: Rochebrune, (Nantes, Musée Dobrée), Walh-Offroy (Châteaudun, Musée des beaux-arts et d'histoire naturelle) and Mangin (Chartres, Musée des beaux-arts). There is also some Safavid bronze, such as a series of candlesticks in Nantes, and a large basin in Dijon's Musée des Beaux-Arts. As for ceramics, Châlon-sur-Saône keeps a beautiful Solṭanābād cup, and two Kubachi plates are preserved in Châteaudun. There is a collection of pottery-sherds collected by Cugnin, housed in the Tessé museum in Le Mans.

Some small provincial museums hold interesting surprises in store: the Musée Duplessis in Carpentras owns four superb Qajar paintings (unpublished) given to the painter Jules Laurens by the newly crowned Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah in 1848. Laurens, a native of Carpentras, was the illustrator for the scientific mission led by Xavier Hommaire de Hell; the drawings illustrating his travels were published in 1859. The Qajar paintings, along with some of his own compositions (including two entitled "The Ashraf Gardens," and "The Roofs of Isfahan") were donated to his native city after his death.

Other provincial collections, such as the Maison de Pierre Loti, in Rochefort, are not arranged as museums. The house has been preserved intact, in the way it was left by the famous travel writer. It contains an impressive quantity of objects from his numerous travels, including some Persian 19th century tiles (*kāšīs*), carpets, and weapons (a detailed catalogue of this collection is yet to come).

*Private collections and art market.* Persian and Islamic art in general do not seem to have interested private collectors before the 19th century. One exception was Vicomte de Robien, whose collection of Oriental paintings—mainly Indian—was sequestered in 1792. Before the Exposition Universelle of



1878, only a few private collectors were known, such as Sauvageot, Piet-Lataudrie and Jules-Albert Goupil (Soustiel and David, 1988, p. 7). On the occasion of the Exposition Universelle, Jules Jacquemart, Charles Schefer, Alfred Firmin-Didot and Philippe Burty were the main lenders of Islamic works of art. Between 1879 and 1893, Louis Gonse formed the first great private collection of Oriental (mainly Persian) paintings. A large part of this collection was sold in Paris in 1988. From the beginning of this century, the number of collectors of oriental art in France began to increase considerably: Claude Anet, Raymond Koechlin, Louis Cartier, were among the lenders at the Exhibition of Persian Art at Burlington House, London, in 1931 (*Persian Art: An Illustrated Souvenir*, pp. 42, 45). The famous Exposition des Arts Musulmans, Paris 1903, although not exclusively Persian, was also an important landmark. In 1912, the exhibition of Persian arts of the book at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs organized by Georges Marteau and Henri Vever displayed their magnificent collections, together with some items belonging to the Comtesse de Bearn and Henry d'Allemagne. Marteau's collection went mostly to the Louvre; while Vever's entire collection was acquired by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington (Lowry and Nemazee) and thus lost to France. Two other famous collectors of Persian art were Baron Edmond de Rothschild and his son Maurice. Sevadjan's collection of Islamic ceramics and works of art was sold in 1927 and 1960. Jean Pozzi's collection (1884-1967) was probably one of the most impressive of the time. The most important part of the collection were Persian miniatures and manuscripts, but textiles and ceramics were also included. After his death, the bulk of Persian paintings from Pozzi's collection was donated to the Musée d'art et d'histoire in Geneva (Robinson). However, the sale of oriental paintings from his collection in 1970 still included some outstanding Persian pages such as six illustrations from the so-called "Big heads" *Šāh-nāma* (Soustiel, 1970, nos. 84-89).

Paris is one of the important markets for Islamic art, with experts of international reputation, such as Jean Soustiel and Marie-Christine David, whose gallery, first established in 1926 by Joseph Soustiel is the oldest in Paris specializing in Islamic art. Sales of Islamic objects take place mainly in the Hôtel Drouot and many of the items often come from small and little-known private collections from within France.

There are still some important private collections in France but they try to maintain their anonymity. Thus, the sale in 1992 of Garith Windsor's collection appeared in Melikian's regular art column in the *Herald Tribune* (Melikian,



1992a) as “The End of an Era in Collecting.” Later in the same year was the sale of Pierre Abrami’s collection of Islamic glass and ceramics (Soustiel and David, 1992b, no. 1-57), in which 57 items were sold, including an exceptional (although fragmentary) Koranic frieze in luster ceramic (Kāšān, second half of 13th century), as well as a group of tiles decorated in the same technique, probably from Taḳt-e Solaymān, which again prompted Melikian to write “The collector’s market is alive, but the speculative market is dead” (Melikian, 1992b). Thus, the art market continues to provide art historians with new data.

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