

Hossein Amirsadeghi

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Dr Tristram Hunt
Director, Victoria & Albert Museum Cromwell Road
London SW7 2RL

Dear Dr Tristram Hunt

Ref: **Epic Iran Exhibition**

I must commend the V&A and Iran Heritage Foundation's *Epic Iran* exhibition supported by the Sarrikhani family as an innovative, moving feast. But it is a mere soupcon of the vast treasures held worldwide in the store of Persian history, some of which could have been exploited from major private collections for the sake of inclusivity. Still, this show is a timely reminder of the brilliance of what Iranian culture represents, forgetting the tyrannous excesses of the present ruling clique, which the show does in some subtle ways.

As one who's worked in the past to platform some of Iranian cultural achievements through the medium of books, I'm cognisant of obtuse constraints in navigating cultural sensitivities and political pitfalls, despite the best institutional intentions. *Arts of Persia* (1989) and *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources* (2002, both published by Yale) aimed to bridge such academic and cultural divisions. As it happens, *Peerless Images* splendid launch event was held at the V&A (part of my *Celebration of Persian Genius* roadshow through Europe and America), Prince Charles having provided the opening address. *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Iranian Contemporary Art* (2009, Thames & Hudson) was the first global attempt at showcasing such art.

Despite all that *Epic Iran* achieves, I find your attempts at making the show "apolitical" fall far short of equitable expectations. Referring to "the monarchy's authoritarian rule, its ties to economically exploitative western powers, and its self-aggrandising attempts to channel Iran's pre-Islamic past" is hardly non-political, wouldn't you say? Specially as the V&A fails to reference the chaos and tyranny of the last four decades of Islamic rule in Iran – the first of its kind in our entire history. Managing soothing words in describing the present regime as "attempting to open up to the rest of the world despite hard-line domestic policies and international economic sanctions" as quoted by the New York Times review, seems to excuse the regime's antics.

Which, then, is the right course of action? Faulting the previous regime for attempting to modernise under a different world order during the 50s, 60s and 70s with ties to "economically exploitative" countries like Britain and America? Or being the sanctioned victim of these same western nations for the egregious behaviour of a rogue state with blood on its hands? Perhaps a less exploitative model for the previous regime would have been to embrace the Soviet Union in your curator's mind?

Whilst the V&A makes contrived reference to the overthrow of "Iran's democratically elected prime minister", you signally fail any mention of the previous dynasty's role in bringing Iran out of its medieval torpor (exploited to the hilt by Imperial Britain during the

Qajar Dynasty), and into the modern age. But for Reza Shah there would be no “Epic” to celebrate Iran within cultural norms. It was during his extraordinary modernising reign (cut short by the British) when museums were first built, archaeology promoted and the wholesale looting and theft of national treasures by foreigners (Britain being foremost) stopped. Cultural rape, which resurfaced earnestly with the coming to power of the Mullahs. Stolen collections illegally sent abroad as the Khomeini regime attempted wholesale eradication of Iran’s past and imperial glories.

As to the earlier mention of Dr Mossadegh (whose portrait is promotionally featured in the end run of your exhibition), do kindly correct the narrative history as Iran has never had a democratically elected prime minister, as voters at no time elected prime ministers. The Shah did, according to the 1906 Iranian constitution. Doing down the Pahlavi’s for obtuse curatorial effect, while highlighting their opposition, is not reassuring of dispassionate intent or fair-minded cultural discourse.

The final grating act in this nuanced curatorial drama is the show’s exposition of a “series recreating notorious deaths from Iran’s past” with Azadeh Akhlaghi’s re-enactment of the “Shah’s secret police” assassinating an armed “student activist” on Teheran’s streets in 1974. God forbid, what would the public outcry be today if the “Queen’s secret service” were to shoot dead armed terrorists in London? Perhaps your expose should have also referenced the tens of thousands of “assassinations” in Iran since the 1979 revolution, most recent incident of which being the 1500-odd (unarmed) citizens shot to death on the country’s streets during the Bloody November nationwide protests in 2019.

Airbrushing current history, however subtly, cannot be pardoned for short or medium-term benefit (cultural or otherwise) given the stakes involved. Notwithstanding these caveats, I must thank you as an Iranian for having managed to engineer such a colourful show under trying circumstances.

Respectfully Yours