

07 July 2010

# A glimpse of royal Persia: lavish manuscript paintings bring Iran's 1000 year-old national epic to life

## Epic of the Persian Kings: The Art of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

11 September 2010 – 9 January 2011

Presented with the support of Iran Heritage Foundation

This autumn, a landmark exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum explores the monumental artistic legacy of one of the world's greatest literary epics: the 1000 year-old Persian 'Book of Kings', or *Shahnameh*.

Completed by the poet Ferdowsi in 1010 AD, this vast narrative poem telling the 'Iranian version' of the history of the world is an icon of Persian culture, inspiring some of the world's most exquisite manuscripts. To mark the passing of a millennium since its completion, *Epic of the Persian Kings: The Art of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh* now brings together nearly one hundred paintings from these lavishly illustrated manuscripts spanning 800 years, in the most comprehensive exhibition of *Shahnameh* art yet mounted in this country.

The *Shahnameh* is Iran's national epic; a vast narrative that mixes royal history with the mythical and supernatural, from the creation of the world and the first men through to the fall of the Persian Empire in the 7th century AD. Twice as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, and only finished after thirty-five years, it is the longest recorded poem ever written by a single author.

Ferdowsi conceived his epic as a memorial to Iran's glorious past, at a time when political upheavals meant that the values of Persian civilisation were in danger of disappearing forever; the tales of the *Shahnameh* have been crucial in shaping the cultural identity of the Iranian world ever since. The poem's potent mixture of kingly chronicles and supernatural adventures fascinated Iranian monarchs throughout the centuries that followed, with sumptuous illustrated manuscripts being commissioned to bring its warring kings, heroes, dragons and demons to life.

For this landmark exhibition, The Fitzwilliam Museum has now gathered together many fine examples of those richly illustrated manuscripts and of Persian miniature paintings from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, drawn from public and private collections in the UK including the British Museum, the British Library, the V&A, the Royal Asiatic Society, the Bodleian Library and collections



Rostam lifts Afrasiyab of Turan by the belt (c. 1435-1440)



Fire Ordeal of Siavash (1620-1621)



Lohrasp enthroned (c.1540)

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within Cambridge. Rarely-seen treasures from the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle will also be on display.

As well as its creation, intricate history and profound cultural impact, this exhibition explores the multitude of stories and myths contained within the *Shahnameh*, and how different generations of artists have depicted its thrilling tales, from brutal murders to bloody battle scenes; from love affairs to moral dilemmas; from triumphant conquests to – finally – the destruction of the Persian Empire. Embellished with gold, lapis lazuli and other precious pigments, these manuscripts juxtapose fantastical portrayals of terrifying *divs* (demons) and monstrous creatures with astonishingly expressive depictions of human emotion, from scenes of tender affection to fiercely violent struggles – set against backdrops of beautifully detailed landscapes, and peopled by crowds of onlookers, who spill over the pages and peep at the scenes contained within.

In bringing together these manuscripts, many of which are on public display for the first time, the exhibition highlights the techniques of their painstaking illumination, their calligraphy and their precious bindings. Works from Sultanate and Mughal-era India and Afghanistan will show how the significance of the *Shahnameh* extended beyond the land of its creation into these neighbouring territories from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards. As well as these prize manuscripts, this exhibition will bring together ceramics, metalwork and painting on silk whose imagery was inspired by the poem's fascinating amalgam of history, myth and legend – from frieze tiles to ornate bowls, and even an Iranian saddle of the type depicted under horsemen throughout the manuscripts.

Timothy Potts, Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, said “It is impossible to overstate the significance of Ferdowsi’s ‘Book of Kings’, which remains, a millennium after its completion, one of the most popular texts of secular poetry in Southwest Asia. In its ambition, scope and spectacular range of displays, this exhibition at the Fitzwilliam is truly a landmark, and for many visitors will be a revelatory introduction to the *Shahnameh* and its world.”

Bringing together a spectacular range of remarkable treasures, *Epic of the Persian Kings: The Art of Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh* presents a captivating literary and artistic tradition that for many in the West has remained hidden. A diverse programme of events will accompany the exhibition, from talks and lectures by international authorities on the *Shahnameh* and creative workshops for all ages, to concerts of Persian music, film and theatrical performances bringing these tales to life.

*Epic of the Persian Kings: The Art of Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh* was conceived by Charles Melville, Professor of Persian History and Director of the Shahnama Project, University of Cambridge, and is curated by independent scholar Barbara Brend. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue.

*The exhibition is presented with the support of Iran Heritage Foundation, and is also supported by the Bahari Foundation, Denis and Minouche Severis, Parsa Community Foundation, Princess Guity Qajar Fund, Monica and Ali Wambold, the ILEX Foundation and the Islamic Manuscript Foundation.*



Jamshid's throne borne by *divs* (c.1435)



Key Kavus airborne (c.1435)

## Details for publication:

### Epic of the Persian Kings: The Art of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

11 September 2010 – 9 January 2011

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

OPEN: Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 – 17.00

Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00

ADMISSION FREE

### Press View: Friday 10 September 2010 at 12 noon

Media attending will be offered:

- An introduction to the exhibition and works on display with curator Barbara Brend and Charles Melville, Director of the Shahnama Project, University of Cambridge
- Interview, photograph or filming opportunities with the above and Fitzwilliam Museum Director Dr Timothy Potts
- Press pack including image CD

A light lunch will be available.

### Further information and images or to pre-arrange press view interviews, contact:

The Marketing and Press Office

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## Notes for Editors

### The Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum houses the University of Cambridge's art collection and is a public museum and art gallery with an international reputation. More than half a million objects and works of art are held in five curatorial departments: Antiquities, Applied Arts, Coins and Medals, Manuscripts and Printed Books and Paintings, Drawings and Prints. The Fitzwilliam's treasures range from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities to the arts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and include masterpieces by Titian, Canaletto, Stubbs, Constable, Monet, Renoir and Picasso, one of the world's foremost Rembrandt print collections, Handel music manuscripts and the famous Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, one of the most significant collections of Korean ceramics outside South-East Asia, medieval illuminated manuscripts and outstanding collections of pottery, porcelain and medieval coins. The Fitzwilliam Museum welcomes over 300,000 visitors a year, offers a wide-ranging programme of temporary exhibitions and events, and has an award-winning Education Service. The Museum is open Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 – 17.00, Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00. Free admission.

[www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)

### Iran Heritage Foundation (IHF)

Iran Heritage Foundation is a non-political UK registered charity with the mission to promote and preserve the history, languages and cultures of Iran and the Persianate world. The objectives of the Foundation are pursued by organising, on a worldwide basis, diverse activities of cultural or scholarly merit. IHF programmes include academic research, publishing and fellowships at top universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, and Exeter and at museums in the United Kingdom and abroad. Most recently, the IHF launched its Institutional Partnership Programme with posts supported at the Universities of Cambridge, Edinburgh, and St Andrews and at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Freer and Sackler Galleries, Smithsonian Institution. By forging ties with most of the major museums and universities around the world, the Foundation has succeeded in bringing the highest level of expertise to its programmes, making IHF the partner of choice for many of these institutions. IHF's international reach has included programmes in Armenia, Austria, Canada, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United States, Britain, and more. This reach will continue to increase as the Foundation pursues important initiatives to digitise programmes and reach a wider virtual audience in the next few years.

[www.iranheritage.org/](http://www.iranheritage.org/)

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