



Ina Sarikhani at the Sarikhani Collection, near Henley, Oxfordshire, in October 2020

Meet the collectors: Ina Sarikhani

An extensive collection of outstanding works of art and objects from Iran will form a significant part of an upcoming exhibition at the V&A, shining a light on 5,000 years of Iranian culture. *Elizabeth Fullerton* talks to the collection's co-founder. Portrait by *Peter Guenzel*



از وقارن زدم زخم چستیمه بود
 براونیت جوش شیر مار با ران
 پوسوی جار چه چنن باوش امان
 بخون برادر کمر پسته بود و

یکی سینره ز در کمر بند او
 بنمود قارن بیاران خود
 بکشند جندی ز توران سپاه
 فورانسو که بدشا نو در بجای
 نغمی کشت و لشکر همه بر گرفت
 چنین کنت روشن ملی تیر توشت
 چنین است کردون با پایدار
 جو افرا سپاس کسب انیشت
 که بکپست نبیاد و پوند او
 که اینی نام داران و کردان
 بپستند و کرسی کینه خواه
 در اندیشه بد شاه آرو خدای
 جو تیر از پیش روی بنهاد و فرست
 پسزد و کشتای بی پن بند کوش
 که با کسپن نباشد سبب پاکار
 که پوسوی بیابان نهان کرد و
 فرو آمد و سپهر بریدش زنن
 بر آید ازین با کاران مار
 بزفشند نزدیک افرا سیاب
 جو گاه شد نامور پاد شاه
 منی خاست کرد ز بد بگذرد
 ز تقدیر کسپن کند ز چکان
 اگر شیر پاست اگر کلبه بان
 سپاه انجمن کرد و پویان رفت
 براونیت ازین کوا انجمن
 که بر کشته بخند و بدر و ز کار
 نغمین کشته از رزم و دل شرباب
 که قارن کذر کرد از ان زنگاه
 سپر شش کمر ز پر بی پسترد
 اگر خود پر دپوسب آسمان
 جو روش سپر آمد بخند امان
 دمان ز پس شاه جویمان رفت

Today the collection numbers nearly 1,000 works of art and artefacts, and it is still growing



Left: detached folio from an illuminated manuscript of the *Shahnameh* for Shah Tahmasp, Tabriz, 1525-35; above: star lustre tile with deer, Kashan, 13th century; below, right: naked woman figurine, c1200-800bc

Discreetly tucked away in a private underground museum near Henley in Oxfordshire resides the Sarikhani Collection, a magnificent trove of Iranian art, encompassing manuscripts, textiles, silverware, glass, paintings and ceramics from 3,000bc to the 18th century. One of the great joys of having this collection, says its co-founder Ina Sarikhani Sandmann, is to go there with a glass of wine on a Saturday evening, take an object out of its case, look at it closely and discuss it with her family. ‘The handling of the object is really important,’ she explains. ‘The opening of the book, the light that is cast on the illumination, the weight of a ceramic in your hand or the coolness of metal – all of those are a very intrinsic aspect of enjoying art in a kind of Iranian sense. It’s that intimate, personal moment of insight, either into yourself or into existence. I think that’s really what art is about.’

Sarikhani is loath to rank the objects in the collection – ‘It’s like choosing between your children,’ she protests – but one especially cherished item is an 18th-century lacquer pen box whose lid depicts a relatively innocent banqueting scene of dancers and musicians entertaining a royal couple on an outdoor terrace. Opening the box, however, one finds the princess reclining sensually in a see-through shift, her seductive gaze directed at the viewer. ‘She’s scantily clad, which is the most beautiful thing, and you think, ‘Wow, did she have that made for him?’ Sarikhani muses. ‘Was she saying, ‘While you’re off on your travels, don’t forget me?’’

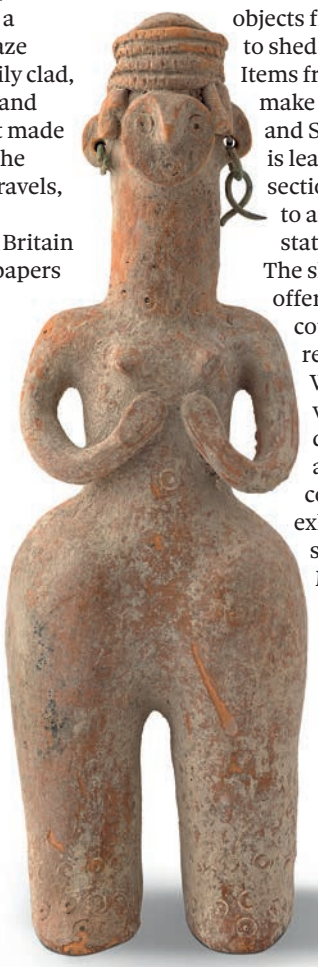
The Sarikhani family arrived in Britain with a couple of suitcases and no papers or money, fleeing Iran along with hundreds of thousands of others in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Their first purchases, made in the UK, in the 1990s, were 10 artefacts, including a cuneiform clay cylinder dating to the seventh century BC and a 16th-century Safavid openwork steel door plaque bearing the Quranic quotation: ‘Those who believe and do right: joy is for them and bliss (their) journey’s end.’ The Sarikhani family never intended to build a collection.

The germ was a yearning for their homeland and a frustration with not being able to return, what Sarikhani describes as ‘a hole’. She and her father, Ali Sarikhani, a financial entrepreneur, began to buy objects as a way of connecting with Iran. ‘We are both very headstrong and intense people, and so soon, those 10 objects became 100 and then 200.’ Today the collection numbers nearly 1,000 works of art and artefacts and it is still growing. Her 74-year-old father still takes an avid interest but Ina Sarikhani, who has a degree in history and philosophy from Cambridge and Master’s degrees from both SOAS, University of London, and the Courtauld Institute of Art, is largely responsible for running it. The museum opened in September 2011, conceived as a resource for family, friends, academics and students.

Working behind the scenes to further an appreciation of Iranian culture and provide loans to museums and universities, the family has kept a low profile for years. Now that is set to change. The Sarikhani Collection is about to play a significant role in the V&A’s upcoming show ‘Epic Iran’, which marks Britain’s first major exhibition on Iranian art and culture for nine decades. Spanning 5,000 years to the present, the exhibition will bring together some 360

objects from ancient to contemporary Iran to shed light on this towering civilisation. Items from the Sarikhani Collection will make up around one-sixth of the show and Sarikhani, who is associate curator, is leading the contemporary and modern section. ‘It just felt like now was the time to actually have a voice and to make a statement about what we do,’ she says. The show’s organisers hope that it will offer a broad, inspiring narrative to counter the history of fraught political relations between Iran and the West.

US President Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, bellicose rhetoric and intensification of sanctions has complicated matters in staging the exhibition, particularly in terms of securing loans from the National Museum of Tehran. ‘Every week it becomes more challenging. But in a sense that means every week it’s more important to do,’ V&A director Tristram Hunt said



PHOTOS: © THE SARIKHANI COLLECTION



in 2019 when announcing the forthcoming exhibition programme.

The idea for the show came from former V&A director Martin Roth (who died in 2017), and who had approached the Sarikhani family about exhibiting the collection at the museum. Sarikhani suggested it would be more exciting to mount an ambitious exhibition uniting important private collections with those of the V&A and institutions such as the British Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Louvre and the Hermitage. 'I've always felt that there's a much, much bigger, more interesting story to tell, that we're just a little cog in a big cultural machine,' she says. Consequently, around 40 institutions are participating in 'Epic Iran'.

Among the highlights of the show is a spectacular folio from an illuminated manuscript of the *Shahnameh* produced for the Shah Tahmasp around 1525-35, from the Sarikhani Collection. The painting depicts a nocturnal battle scene from the epic poem in which the Iranian warrior Qaran spears the man who killed his brother and his army routs the enemy Turanian troops. What is extraordinary about the folio is the exquisite level of detail, from the colourful robes of the warriors and intricate caparisons of their horses to the inky star-studded sky and delicate flora of the landscape. So vividly captured is the action that one can almost hear the triumphant sound of the trumpeters and the clash of spears on shields.

Another favourite piece of Sarikhani's that will feature in 'Epic Iran' is a bronze casting of an Elamite couple from the second millennium BC that was probably a votive figurine. The quality of the casting is outstanding, detailing the facial features, clothes and gestures with precision. 'When you hold an object, you see an object, and it's like time collapses. You can go right back and feel that creative energy of the artist. In this piece, you think, "This has been created for this wealthy Elamite couple as a semblance of them. It would pray 24/7 for them while they got on with their life,"' says Sarikhani. 'It gives you clues to what people valued, what was important to them, their priorities, their pains, their pleasures. I'm very, very moved by this glimpse into a married couple nearly 4,000 years ago.'

How did Sarikhani and her father come by such treasures? She says the collection evolved

organically, from buying a couple of objects that then related to others: 'I always say the objects chose us.'

The pair have focused on items that have been collected and dispersed in Europe and America, avoiding Iran, in part due to concerns over provenance and title issues. In 2006 they acquired an immense collection of ceramics from the US media tycoon John W Kluge, which had originally been assembled in the 1960s and 1970s for the last Shah's brother Prince Ali-Reza Pahlavi. They have also purchased a number of items, including the *Shahnameh* folio and the lacquer pen box, from the Iranian-American scholar Layla Diba, who ran a museum in Tehran in the 1970s and more recently has worked as a curator at the Brooklyn Museum. 'The one criterion we've always had is that objects have to be absolutely fantastic. There was not going to be a compromise on aesthetic quality. That's been our driving force,' says Sarikhani. This is clear from a brief video tour of the museum that she gives me on FaceTime. One enters the space through a striking mosaic-tiled vestibule, designed by artisans from Isfahan, who lived on site for six months. Passing through 14th-century carved Timurid doors, one finds elegantly lit showcases spread over two levels. The camera glides past priceless artefacts: a first-century bronze feline leaping statue, a silver feasting cup (rhyton) narrowing to a horse form, a gold ram's-horn-shaped pectoral from the second millennium – 'an expensive bit of male jewellery', Sarikhani notes wryly.

At the same time as building up and managing the collection, Sarikhani is involved with various museums – as a trustee at the Royal Academy of Arts, for example, as a founder member of the International Council at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and member of the visiting committee for the renovation of its Ancient Near East department and chair of the Sarre Club, a think-tank for the Islamic Museum at the Pergamon in Berlin. The family has also funded the refurbishment of the Ashmolean Museum's Ancient Near East galleries. The Sarikhanis also have around 45 objects on long-term loan at St Andrews University in Scotland, which students can handle, and they regularly organise tours and seminars within their museum.

As a separate activity to the collection, Sarikhani also collects contemporary and non-Iranian art. In her office she has an Old Master painting, an African fetish figure, a porcelain figure by Dutch artist Bouke de Vries and an 18-panel avant-garde

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Ina Sarikhani



Above, left: Elamite couple, 1500-1100bc; above: rhyton, fifth to fourth century bc; right: royal bust, fifth century; below, left: lacquer *qalamdan*, or pen case, 1717



PHOTOS: © THE SARIKHANI COLLECTION

'I think the richness, skill and the depth of Iranian culture will be a surprise for everyone'
Ina Sarikhani

painting from the 1970s by artist Sergei Volokhov charting a cultural history of Russia through portraits of tsars, writers, revolutionaries and a gory decapitated John the Baptist. 'We're definitely not afraid of controversial works,' she laughs. But Iranian art remains close to her heart and she also has a wall text sculpture by the contemporary Iranian artist Hossein Valamanesh. Sarikhani's eclectic taste is evident in the broad range of contemporary and modern artists featured in 'Epic Iran' across diverse media including painting, sculpture, photography, film and animation. The modern segment emphasises the creative exchange between Iranian and Western artists in the vibrant artistic scene between the end of the Second World War and the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Works by Massoud Arabshahi, Hossein Zenderoudi and Parviz Tanavoli as well as experiments in abstraction by Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian and Behjat Sadr clearly reflect their involvement in and responses to the international Modernist movement. 'They were travelling and showing abroad, in conversation with other artists and forerunning a lot of the movements. Someone like Marcos Grigorian, who worked with earth, foreran the Land Art movement by over a decade,' notes Sarikhani. The contemporary section charts the wealth of art that has emerged in the post-revolution aftermath, from artists based in Iran and from the Iranian diaspora. It reveals that in this digitally connected age preoccupations among Iranian artists are similar to those of their non-Iranian counterparts, focusing on issues of gender, politics, religion and identity, as well as censorship and control. 'No government owns its culture, and I think the richness, skill and the depth of Iranian culture will be a surprise for



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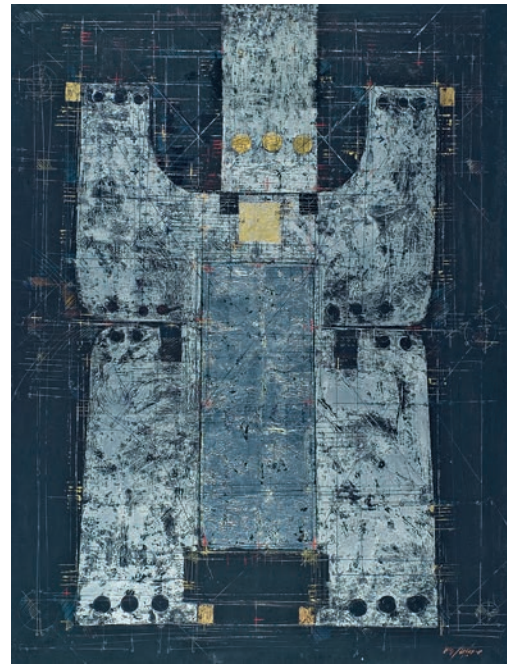
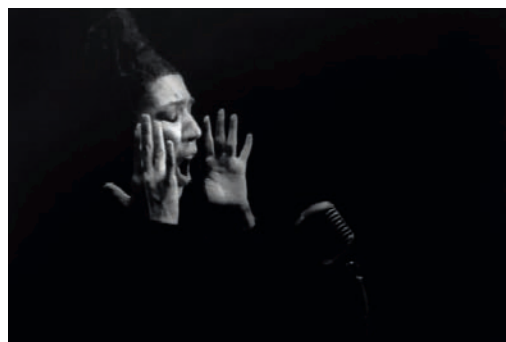


everyone,' says Sarikhani. The show includes an animation by Avish Khebrezadeh, a film by Shirin Neshat, a photographic self-portrait by Khosrow Hassanzadeh interrogating stereotypes of Middle Eastern identity and a portrait by Shirin Aliabadi expressing the fusion of Eastern and Western popular cultures in Iran today. *Miss Hybrid No. 3* (2008) depicts a blonde, blue-eyed Iranian woman wearing the hijab and nonchalantly blowing a huge bubble with gum.

Besides the artworks, the curators hope to convey the wonder of the Iranian landscape and architecture, aware that many visitors are unlikely to have been to the country. This will be achieved partly through audiovisual films of landscapes and cities such as Kashan and Isfahan. The V&A will also use its own objects such as a series of 19th-century sections of domes made on research expeditions to Iran, some of which will be shown in their actual size, rising above the exhibition space. In addition, they will then be recreated as full domes, using AV projections. 'People can get a sense that these aren't just objects, but they exist within a space and a landscape,' Sarikhani says.

For Sarikhani, the significance of 'Epic Iran' and, indeed, her family's collection, lies in connecting cultures and communities and emphasising their commonalities. 'It's themes of humanity, of deity, the divine, it is of love, war, poetry, life, death. These are all the same subjects that we see throughout the world, just expressed in a particular way.'

● 'Epic Iran', organised by the V&A with the Iran Heritage Foundation in association with The Sarikhani Collection, V&A, London, scheduled to open 13 February to 30 August 2021, vam.ac.uk. £9 with National Art Pass (£18 standard)



Above, left: Behjat Sadr, *Untitled*, 1974; above: Massoud Arabshahi, *Farvahar*, Avesta series, 1977; right: Shirin Aliabadi, *Miss Hybrid No. 3*, 2008; below, left: Shirin Neshat, *Turbulent*, 1998 (film stills); all works shown from 'Epic Iran'



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