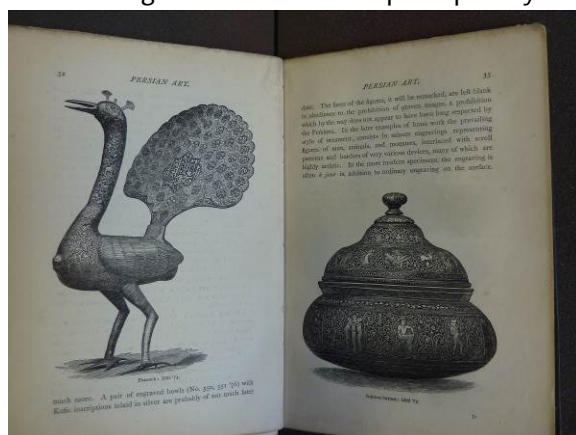


6 chapters of my book: 'Collecting Art and Design in Qajar Iran' London: V&A, 2016.

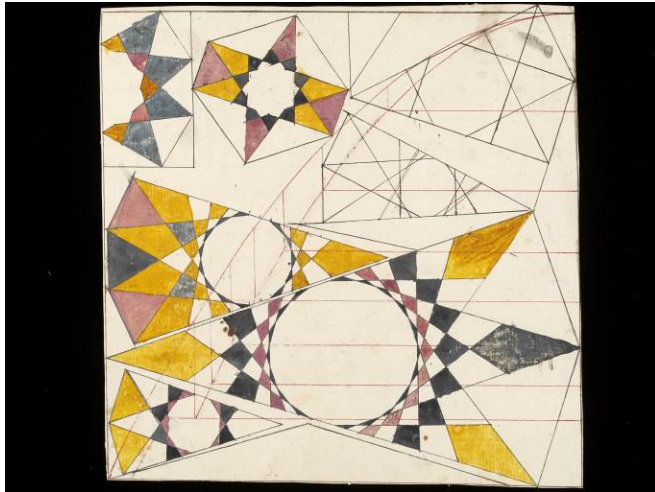
"A Considerable Collection" – The Exhibition of Persian Art (1876)

Iran's mission to modernise both infrastructure and industry was met with by European investors keen to run lucrative projects through exclusive concessions. The installation of the telegraph system also held strategic relevance for Britain, offering vital communications with India. The Anglo-Persian stretch was directed by Robert Murdoch Smith who became the Victoria and Albert Museum's purchasing agent in Iran, from 1873. The main conduit for his activities was Jules Richard, a French photographer at Dar al-Funun, a newly-established technical college in Tehran. Long resident in Iran, Richard had been collecting massive quantities of historic artworks before they became so profitably popular: with Murdoch Smith's arrival came the opportunity to sell. The exposure occasioned by the subsequent 1876 "Exhibition of Persian Art" contributed to a massive increase in international demand. The 1876 Exhibition's accompanying handbook featured lithograph illustrations of selected "highlight objects", most of which are engraved brass vessels of recent Iranian manufacture, including a large peacock figurine. As shown (and probably occasioned) by their prominence in the guidebook, these figurines were very fashionable after 1876: they decorated domestic interiors such as William Morris's Kenwood House. However they were only briefly in the limelight, and fell from vogue within a decade: perhaps they had become altogether too popular.



"Master Builders" – The architectural drawings of Mirza Akbar

Not all of the V&A's Iranian collections were purchases: the unique Mirza Akbar archive was offered as a gift between architectural practitioners, in 1875. This archive consists of over 200 drawings, plans and sketches from Qajar Tehran, and is a unique survival of architectural design methodology. In 1874-75, the South Kensington-trained architect Caspar Purdon Clarke was in Tehran completing the British embassy buildings with a local team of workers. During this collaboration, two of Purdon Clarke's Tehran colleagues gave him the portfolio in exchange for his teaching them new techniques. On his return to London in 1876, Purdon Clarke placed the drawings in the National Art Library at the V&A: they were received with great interest in British architectural circles, although not fully understood. Specialists were keen to trace the intellectual origins of European architecture within Asia's ancient past, and the Mirza Akbar series was treated as evidence of that theoretical lineage.



“Actual Size” – Recording Safavid tilework designs in Isfahan

In 1877, the V&A commissioned 33 designs to be copied directly from the vividly-patterned tiled surfaces of six normally inaccessible religious monuments in Qajar Isfahan. Access was complicated, and Robert Murdoch Smith’s Telegraph Department was briefly a pawn between secular and religious power-bases in conservative Isfahan. This project contrasts with the purchase of small groups of decorated tiles, which occurred at the same time across Iran. The grand scale of these enormous Isfahan designs is dramatic, and compares to the intended impact of the Cast Court galleries opened in 1873 at the V&A. Aside from the original scale of Safavid architecture, the designs also convey the colourful flat pattern so beloved by Victorians in Safavid carpets.



“Modern Tiles” – Ali Muhammad Isfahani in Tehran

Although historic artworks were increasingly preferred by private collectors and art historians, the V&A also collected contemporary art manufactures in some cases. For ceramics, while thirteenth-century lustre and seventeenth-century Safavid blue and white fritware were hugely admired, Murdoch Smith was initially unmoved by contemporary production, and barely addressed “modern tiles” during the 1870s. Nonetheless, under Nasruddin Shah Qajar Tehran was awash with urban renovation projects, with grand city gateways and squares requiring major production of new tilework. Only in the 1880s, did Murdoch Smith find something to his taste: the work of Ali Muhammad Isfahani, “a clever young potter”, who worked in Isfahan and then moved to Tehran. The Museum began to acquire his work from 1884 onwards, and even commissioned a treatise from him, published in Edinburgh in 1888. Ali Muhammad’s “art-school” style was self-consciously historicist, in forms as well as figural styles and references, which align with an international export taste, as well as contemporary publication of lithograph-illustrated books in Tehran.



“Singular Perfection” – Collecting ‘Persian Carpets’ for the V&A (1873-1893)

Design Reformers in late nineteenth century Europe regarded Safavid Iranian carpets as sublime, and attempted to disseminate that “classical” design perfection through the modern replication of traditional designs in contemporary manufactures, and through the public display of particularly excellent historic examples, such as the Ardabil Carpet (bought by the V&A in 1893). However, the disappointing history of replicating historic carpet designs shows how difficult this anachronistic idea actually was, as was noted in the 1891-92 Vienna carpet exhibition. Meanwhile the extreme rarity and design sophistication of historic carpets was rendering them highly expensive elite commodities, which museums could barely afford. A stratification of “Oriental Carpets” had emerged, with modern replicas booming but increasingly disdained as bourgeois aspiration, and historic fragments lionized. Both were exported throughout the late nineteenth-century, with market prices reflecting this separation, and to this day, the iconic western idea of the “Persian Carpet” retains that consumer elitism.



Conclusion: “Persian Art” in South Kensington, Edinburgh and Dublin

Nasruddin Shah was in Paris at the time of the 1889 Exposition Universelle, and duly visited the pavilion representing Qajar Iran. In his (published) diary account, he noted that the display included great quantities belonging to Jules Richard in particular, and the extraordinary profit which the Frenchman had gained through his decades of collecting artworks old and new. The Shah observed that most of the Richard collection has been bought by a “London Museum”, i.e. the V&A. This concluding chapter examines the Paris Exhibition and the massive acquisition in its aftermath. Both the Dublin and Edinburgh Museums were allowed to purchase from the V&A’s bulk purchase, following the typical system between the networked Museums of Science and Art. The Edinburgh Museum had an additional perspective on this process: Robert Murdoch Smith had become its Director, and had rescued the Museum’s deal with his long acquaintance Jules Richard when negotiations seemed about to fail.

