

Title

Shah `Abbas I and the Great Shrines of the Safavids

What this Study Contributes

This research project focuses on three Shi`i shrines in Iran at Ardabil, Mashhad and Qum during the period of Shah `Abbas I (r. 1587-1629) in preparation for an exhibition at the British Museum and its catalogue, in partnership with the National Museum of Iran, as well as a scholarly conference in 2009.

Team

Principal Investigator: Dr Sheila Canby (The British Museum)

Co-Investigator: Prof Robert Gleave (Exeter)

Research Assistant: Dr. Fahmida Suleman (The Institute of Ismaili Studies)

University

The British Museum

Award

Phase 1 Small Grant £82,784

Research Partners

Dr. Kishwar Rizvi (Yale University), Dr. Jon Thompson (Ashmolean Museum) plus others

Approach

The research has investigated Shah `Abbas and Shiism in the context of Isfahan, which Shah `Abbas designated as his capital in 1598, and the three most important shrines in Iran during the Safavid Dynasty; the Shrine of Shaykh Safi at Ardabil, the Shrine of `Ali ibn Musa al-Riza (Imam Riza) at Mashhad, and the Shrine of Fatimeh Ma`sumeh at Qum. The goal of the exhibition and catalogue is to explain the religious significance of the shrines and how Shah `Abbas sought to transform them. The exhibition also demonstrates how these shrines have continued to attract popular and political attention within Iran from the 17th Century to the present day.

The research and its outcomes endeavour to provide a historical perspective on the role of pilgrimage and shrines from a non-Christian perspective; consider the historical development of Shiism in Iran to provide a perspective on the relationship between religion and society in Iran today; and through exploring the relationships between architecture, text and objects with religion and politics.

The principal research methods have involved studying the objects that are shown in the exhibition and reading primary and secondary sources and the history, art and architecture of the period of Shah `Abbas. Work on the exhibits has involved reading Persian and Arabic inscriptions, some technical analysis, and art-historical investigation.

Findings

Project finished 31st December 2008.

The most important findings of the research are connected with the three shrines and the objects given to them by Shah `Abbas or by others during his reign.

1. The inclusion of Chinese ceramics from the Ardabil Shrine enabled us to propose that Iranian potters developed new styles of pottery having been inspired by the Chinese examples that were on public view in Iran for the first time. The appearance around 1615 of a group of paintings depicting dervishes using large blue and white pottery pieces at their gatherings suggests that the wares deposited by Shah `Abbas at the Ardabil Shrine were actually used by the dervishes who visited the shrine. Thus, the gift of porcelains to the Ardabil Shrine had results that were unforeseen by Shah `Abbas.
2. Among the manuscripts that Shah `Abbas presented to the Shrine of Imam Riza is a group of 9th-century Qur`ans containing `signatures` of the Shi`i imams. Since the Imams mostly lived and died in the 7th and 8th centuries, the signatures in these Qur`ans cannot be authentic. This suggests that in the Safavid period

such a premium was placed on objects connected with the Shi`i Imams that people were prepared to add fake signatures to them.

3. The research uncovered only one charitable donation to the Shrine of Fatimeh Ma`sumeh in Qum made by Shah `Abbas. However, after his death all the succeeding Safavid shahs were buried there. The absence of Chinese porcelains and Arabic scientific manuscripts from the treasures presented in the Shrine Museum at Qum and the presence of a number of silk textiles and carpets has led to the proposal that, as a result of Shah `Abbas's development of the luxury silk market and the development of a new artistic style associated with the decoration of his monuments and the other arts of his reign, opulent silks replaced the porcelains and manuscripts as the type of precious item deemed suitable as gifts to the great Shi`i shrines. This was not to the exclusion of more utilitarian items such as candlesticks and woollen carpets. However, it does indicate a shift in taste and in the notion of what was valuable during and after the reign of Shah `Abbas.

Activities and Outcomes

'Shah `Abbas The Remaking of Iran' exhibition at the British Museum 19 February – 14 June 2009

Sheila R. Canby, *Shah `Abbas: the Remaking of Iran*, exhibition catalogue, British Museum Press, 2009

Sheila R. Canby, *Shah `Abbas and the Treasures of Imperial Iran*, gift book, British Museum Press, 2009

DVD: *Shah `Abbas: the Remaking of Iran*

Conferences

People of the Prophet's House: People of the Prophet's House: art, architecture and Shiism in the Islamic world, 26-28 March, 2009

The World of Shah `Abbas, 15-16 May, 2009

The Art of Isfahan Through the Ages, study day, 25 April, 2009

Further Information

http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/all_current_exhibitions/shah_abbas.aspx

