3rd Annual Islamic Art History Research Workshop

Islamic Art History Network (IAHN) & Persian Manuscripts Association (PMA)

In Memory of Dr Sheila Canby

IAHN
THE PARSI ASSOCIATION OF THE IRANIAN UK

Persian Manuscripts Association

UNIVERSITY
of York

3rd Annual Islamic Art History Research Workshop

In Memory of Dr Sheila Canby

Islamic Art History Network (IAHN) &
Persian Manuscripts Association (PMA)

5–6 December 2025

Huntingdon Room
Kings Manor, Exhibition Square, York YO1 7EP

Conference Programme
Day One

12:00-12:10   **Welcome**

Prof. Marcus Milwright

Dr Shiva Mihan

Dr Richard McClary

12:15-12:30   **Opening Remarks**

Dr Paul Collins

Remembering Sheila Canby

12:45-14:45   **Panel 1.1**

Chair: Dr Richard McClary

Samareh Rezaei

Masoumeh Karimi

Chandini Jaswal

Zeynep Ergün

14:45-15:15   **Coffee Break**

15:15-16:45   **Panel 1.2**

Chair: Prof. Marcus Milwright

Zeinab Tamassoki

Atri Hatef Naiemi

Bilha Moor

9:30-11:00   Panel 2.1

Chair: Dr Richard McClary
Hessamedin Arman

Jaimee Comstock-Skipp

Jhinuk Basu

11:00-11:30   Coffee Break

11:30-13:00   Panel 2.2

Chair: Dr Shiva Mihan
Yuxi Pan

Özlem Yıldız

Paul Hepworth

13:00-14:00   Lunch

14:00-15:30   Panel 2.3

Chair: Prof. Marcus Milwright
Hala Qasqas

Maryam Heydarkhani

Amir Mahdi Moslehi

15:30-16:00   Final Discussion

Dr Paul Collins

Keeper, Department of the Middle East, The British Museum

Remembering Sheila Canby

Samareh Rezaei

Politics, Religion, and Mausoleum Architecture:
A Comparative Study of Three Prominent Mausoleum Towers
in Northern Iran (Mazandaran)

Mausoleum towers are among the most prominent architectural manifestations in Mazandaran, whose earliest examples were constructed under the patronage of the Al-e Bavand (Bavandid) rulers. This tradition continued and expanded by the Marashi family in subsequent periods, particularly after Timur's invasion. Mausoleum towers in Mazandaran were built in diverse forms and affected by various natural, human, and social factors, but their construction and preservation mainly reflect the religious policies of local governments.

This paper studies the role of political-religious orientations in mausoleum towers. In this regard, three prominent examples; Imamzadeh Abbas in Sari, Darvish Fakhr al-Din in Babol, and Shahbalouye Zahed in Chamestan Noor, have been analysed using a descriptive-comparative approach as qualitative research. Data was collected using field studies, including photography, measurement, and structural documentation, and the samples were selected purposefully.

The findings of this research show that the local governments constructed these as religious propaganda and identity symbolism. The governmental attention depended on their geographical location. As the closer buildings to the political centre have taken more support while those farther attracted less. Therefore, attention to the religious figures has been important but played a secondary role than political considerations.

Masoumeh Karimi
University of Tehran

From Maykhāneh to Museum: Decoding the Symbolic and Material Worlds of Hāfiz's Drinking Vessels

Persian poetry and prose masterfully weave together real and imaginary imagery, with the Divan of Hāfiz standing as perhaps the richest repository of vessel imagery in Persian literature. Throughout his verses, Hāfiz repeatedly invokes an array of drinking vessels; jām, piyāleh, sabou, qadah, surāhī, qarābeh, khum and saghar, as central elements of tavern life. These references are not merely poetic devices; many comparable vessels survive today in museums and private collections, offering tangible connections to the cultural world Hāfiz and other literary figures evoked. Although Persian literary terms remain deeply rooted in their cultural and historical contexts, art historical sources lack consistency in their typology, designation, and description. This presentation explores the intertextual relationship between Persian literature and the surviving material record, examining how poetic metaphors and physical artifacts illuminate one another. By analysing form, material, and function across texts and objects, the study seeks to develop a more nuanced framework for identifying these vessels and situating them within broader contexts of late medieval Persian material culture. In doing so, it highlights how literary and material evidence together can enrich our understanding of Islamic art history, and how historical terminology can inform the naming and classification of these vessels in museum collections.

Chandini Jaswal
Panjab University, India

'Jūy-i Shīr' (River of Milk): Unveiling the Influence of Wet Nurses in Mughal India

This paper examines wet nursing and the institution of foster motherhood in Mughal India through the case of Maham Anaga, Emperor Akbar's foster mother and political guardian. Drawing on her representation in Akbari paintings, her architectural patronage, (particularly Khair-ul-Manzil, Delhi, 1561), and the textual accounts by Abu'l Fazl, it explores how the idiom of milk kinship (ridaʿa) shaped the visual vocabulary of feminine authority in the early Mughal culture. Maham Anaga's portrayal—unveiled, elevated, and spatially distinct within imperial scenes—signals her exceptional proximity to sovereignty. Her story, culminating in the dramatic rupture of the "river of milk" between Akbar and her son illustrates how nurturance, devotion, and betrayal were negotiated in the Mughal visual culture. By situating Maham Anaga's image within both Islamic notions of delegated kinship and the Mughal-Timurid-Mongol courtly cultures, this study highlights that the wet nurse was not a marginal domestic figure but a key agent in the visual and political imagination of empire.

Zeynep Ergün

History Department, Boğaziçi University

From Pen to Brush: Translating Khaṭāyī's Sufi Poetry
into Early Safavid Iconography

The poetry of Shāh Ismāʾīl, who adopted the pen name of Khaṭāyī, which are characterized by their deeply messianic essence, convey the religious and political ideologies of Shāh Ismāʾīl, as well as presenting his highly glorifying views on himself. In his poems, Shāh Ismāʾīl describes himself as the legitimate ruler and associates himself with ancient Persian kingly figures, which were written in a southern Turkic dialect, which makes one assume his intended audience not only as his subjects but Turkmans living under Ottoman rule. The monumental Shahnama (Book of Kings) he had commissioned towards the end of his reign, is often viewed as an act to legitimize his new dynasty within traditional Persian ideals Kingship. Not long after it was completed during the reign of his son, the manuscript was gifted to the Ottoman Sultan Selim II.

These works of art produced in early Safavid era, when analyzed together reveals the deliberate use of literature and iconography in the pursuit of legitimacy, a project of translating political claims into material visual culture. Through an analysis of messianic themes in Khaʾtaʾiʾs Divan and the iconographic program of the early Shahnama folios I will try to narrate in an online presentation, how early visual culture was employed to legitimize sacred authority, both in the eyes of the public and against the Ottoman Empire, their neighbor/rivals.

Zeinab Tamassoki

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at HAAMEE, Shahid Beheshti University

Reconsidering the Two Qalams: Abdi Beg Shīrāzī, a New Manuscript, and Unified Origins of Calligraphy, Painting, and Architecture

Studies of the Safavid theory of the two qalam have argued that sixteenth-century writers sought to legitimize painting by equating its instruments and origins with those of calligraphy. Building on but also revising this literature, this paper presents a close study of a previously unstudied mid-sixteenth-century manuscript attributed to Abdi Beg Shīrāzī and produced during the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp. Through codicological description, close reading of the theoretical passages, and comparison with contemporary album prefaces and his entire ouvre, I show that Abdi frames the qalam not simply as a pair of technical implements but as a cosmological and devotional instrument whose genealogy (God → Prophet → ʿAlī → Chains of Artists) authorizes both script and image and extends to architectural domain. This reading complicates existing binaries and situates Abdi's writing at the heart of Safavid strategies for sacralizing pictorial practice and material culture. The paper concludes by proposing an integrated methodological model—textual, material, and visual—that reorients discussions of authorship, piety, and the production of the arts of the book in early modern Iran.

Atri Hatef Naiemi

Adjunct Assistant Pofessor, University of Victoria

Centre-Periphery Architectural Interactions:
The Case of Muzaffarid Yazd

During the Ilkhanid period, centralization efforts under Ghazan Khan and Öljeitü sought to diminish the autonomy of provincial elites. Yet, Persian, Kurdish, and Arab families retained significant influence, governing regions across central and southern Iran while acknowledging Ilkhanid supremacy. This fragile balance collapsed after Abu Saʿid Bahadur Khan's death in 1335, leaving no heir and triggering political fragmentation. Competing factions emerged, including the Jalayirids in Iraq, the Chobanids in Azerbaijan, and the Muzaffarids in central and southeastern Iran. While Mongol authority lingered, the unity of the Ilkhanid state dissolved, enabling provincial rulers to assert sovereignty through khutbah and coinage.

This paper examines Yazd's built environment under the Muzaffarids as part of a broader study on provincial architecture during and after Ilkhanid rule. By analysing urban and architectural projects, it asks whether these developments mirrored imperial models from Ilkhanid capitals or reflected distinct local vocabularies aimed at legitimizing autonomous power. Through this case study, the research explores how architecture functioned as a political instrument in a period of decentralization and dynastic transition.

Bilha Moor

Associate Professor of Art History, University of Denver

Royal Justice and Ancient Iranian Kingship in Illustrated Qajar Cosmographies of the Nineteenth Century

Zakariyyā al-Qazwīnī's cosmography, ʿAjāʾib al-makhlūqāt (Wonders of Creation), is a compendium of the components of heaven and earth from an Islamic perspective. It was a popular text in Islamic lands from the late thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries. This paper examines changes to the illustration program in a manuscript of the cosmography (1816) and in the earliest lithographic edition of the cosmography (1848), both produced in Iran when the Qajar dynasty was in power. The illustrations represent historical and mythical kings and heroes with the features of Qajar royals, and a medieval Persian theory of kingship with Qajar attributes. The images introduced by nineteenth-century Persian artists into the cosmography's centuries old pictorial program reveal what the Qajars emphasized in their perception of the world: their link to Iran's past ruling dynasties and their just and righteous form of governance.

Hessamedin Arman

PhD Candidate, Department of Advanced Art Studies, University of Tehran

Beyond Form: An Iconographic Study of Ceramic House Models in the Medieval Period in Iran

This study examines the so-called "house model" ceramics from medieval Iran. These ceramic figurines, primarily composed of stonepaste and adorned with colorful glazes, serve as more than mere artifacts; they encapsulate social, ritualistic, and cultural meanings embedded within their forms and motifs. By analyzing museum collections and archaeological findings, the research investigates how these objects embody architectural space, social hierarchy, and symbolic representation in the broader Islamic cultural context of the time. The findings reveal that these ceramic models functioned both as tangible reflections of lived environments and as conveyors of complex symbolic narratives, reflecting the dynamics of power and communal identity. This iconographic approach moves beyond formal aesthetics, facilitating a deeper understanding of the interplay between material culture and visual expression in medieval Iranian society. The study thus contributes to expanding critical discourses on Islamic art by highlighting the cultural significance of these often-overlooked ceramic objects.

Jaimee Comstock-Skipp

Leverhulme Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Oxford

Manuscript Arts in Herat at the End of the Abu'l-Khayrid Dynasty ca. 1588-98

In a move launching the political and religious rift between Iran and Transoxiana that is still tangible today, the Abu'l-Khayrids (commonly known as Shaybanid Uzbeks) took Central Asia from the Timurids at the onset of the 16th century. Prior to their fall in 1599, the Abu'l-Khayrids succeeded in the final decade to pry Khurasan, containing the important cities of Herat and Mashhad, from the Safavids.

This paper examines the illustrated manuscripts made during the Abu'l-Khayrid occupation of Khurasan between 1588-98. The military leader Qul Bābā Kūkaltāsh (d. 1598), second to the reigning khan in Bukhara, was tasked with overseeing Herat that had long been a centre of artistic production. Art cannot be separated from politics, and for this reason the talk will present the painted texts made in the former Timurid capital as well as Tūn and Balkh to ascertain the popularity and patronage of select titles from this little-known period of production during Qul Bābā's governance. A seemingly newfound interest in copies of the Dīvān of Ḥāfiẓ and Maṣnavī of Rūmī comes to the fore, reflecting close cultural exchanges and shared compositional conventions between Central Asian and Iranian artisans serving military and religious elites. The manuscripts somewhat paradoxically display fluid dynastic allegiance and Sufi spirituality despite ongoing battles and campaigns in the region.

Jhinuk Basu
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta

The Mughal and post-Mughal *Muraqqa*s: Histories of Travel and Collecting

The many forms of Mughal and post-Mughal Muraqqas (albums), in the history of their patronage, assemblage, collecting, and scattering, challenge the fundamental tenets of the 'art object' of the discipline of Islamic art history.

The circuitous history of travel and dispersal of the folios of albums from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century begins with acts of conquest and loot, but also includes practices of gifting and exchange between Mughal, Safavid, Ottoman and European courts, and practices of collecting and commissioning albums in colonial India. One of the case studies in this paper revolves around the St. Petersburg Muraqqa, whose folios travelled extensively after Nadir Shah's plunder in 1739 until the bulk of these came to be housed in their current location in the Freer Gallery of Art. Another case study looks at Antoine Polier, a colonial 'border-crosser' and shows how his Orientalist disposition becomes a crucial entry point for studying the artworks that he collects in the form of colonial Muraqqas.

I argue that the transfer of ownership of Muraqqas and the cultural self-fashioning of collectors are exhibited through the commissioning and ownership of albums, and how these define and redefine the meanings of the album over time.

Yuxi Pan
SOAS, University of London

A Transcultural Creature:
The Agency of the Horse in Ilkhanid Manuscripts

This paper explores the transcultural process embedded in the horse illustrations of Ilkhanid manuscripts, including Manafiʿ-i Hayavan, the Jāmiʿ al-Tawārīkh, and the Great Mongol Shāhnāmeh. From the late 1290s to the mid-1330s, extant illustrated manuscripts reveal how Islamic and Chinese visual vocabularies merged into a distinct visual idiom in the depiction of horses during the Ilkhanate period, when the Mongol empire facilitated intensive cultural exchange. Rather than viewing this process as passive, the paper argues that the horse illustrations in these manuscripts embody deliberate acts of visual negotiation shaped by the cultural dynamics of the Mongol world.

I propose that, in the case of horse representations, the artists consciously considered their political and symbolic significance within Mongol, Islamic, and Chinese contexts. By depicting horses as mounts for heroic figures in battle and other scenes, the manuscripts elevate their riders—the Mongols—to the status of heroes and kings within the Iranian epic tradition, and as sultans within the Islamic sphere. The selective adaptation of Chinese visual models in the portrayal of horses further underscored their visual potency and social agency in the Mongol world.

Özlem Yıldız
Temple University / ANAMED

Stories of a Stolen Throne:
Queen of Sheba and the Politics of Gender in the Safavid Court

A powerful woman in the Islamic mythology, Balqis (Queen of Sheba), undergoes a religious and political transformation in the tales of the Prophet-King Solomon. Balqis is a sovereign woman, a character unusual to encounter in illustrated Safavid manuscripts. The story follows her journey, which begins as a pagan ruler and continues with a conversion to the monotheistic faith that Solomon promotes. Along with this change comes the hegemony of a male sovereign, Solomon, who is believed to rule over humans, fairies, and djinns alike. What undercurrents did the depictions of Balqis in late sixteenth-century Safavid paintings reflect, regarding the social and political situation of the elite women at the time? This paper traces the representations of a woman losing her visibility and political power as she adopts a new faith. It argues that the themes in the sixteenth-century representations of this religious tale are parallel to the changes in the lives of Safavid ruling-class women as Shi'i Islam's influence rose.

Paul Hepworth

Islamic Manuscript Conservator,
formerly Istanbul University Rare Books Library

A Persian Album: Engaging the Viewer

The primary focus of this paper is the16th-century Shah Tahmasp album from the Yildiz Palace Library. A study of this manuscript has recently been published, to which the present author contributed a chapter on its codicology. Some of the artworks in the album feature explicit visual challenges to the viewer as to how they were originally made or how they were mounted there. The viewer is seemingly expected to be puzzled by them, potentially to facilitate more active engage with the album's contents. The texts included in calligraphic samples in the album were also identified and, again, some aspect of puzzle or challenge appears to have been involved in their selection. Since these albums had a performative function in imperial courts, where they were admired and discussed in group settings, dealing with the challenges and puzzles they pose would have added another dimension to the expression of connoisseurship in these elite circles. With reference also to an imperial Persian carpet and examples from Mughal and Ottoman court production, this research suggests that the intended audiences for Islamic artworks at the imperial level must have been trained to expect, see and appreciate the challenges they contain.

Hala Qasqas
Barakat Trust Postdoctoral Fellow at the Khalili Research Centre,
University of Oxford

Reuniting Text and Object:
Khayāl al-Ẓill and the Public Life of Late Ottoman Damascus

This paper argues that khayāl al-ẓill (shadow theatre) was a vital yet endangered urban performance tradition in nineteenth-century Damascus. Far beyond light entertainment, shadow plays such as Faṣl al-Khashabāt functioned as sharp social commentary, turning coffeehouses into semi-public arenas where audiences could negotiate power, injustice, and everyday anxieties through humor and satire. My research draws on rare 19th-century transcriptions and early printed texts alongside surviving puppets housed at the Museum of Arts and Popular Traditions in al-ʿAzm Palace. By analyzing how verbal wit, double meanings, and social critique were embodied in the material and visual design of characters such as Karākūz, ʿAywāẓ, and Ashʾū Āghā, the paper shows that these plays encoded a form of "hidden resistance" and collective memory outside official historiography. Methodologically, it integrates performance studies, textual analysis of primary sources, and close visual/material study of puppets with attention to their original performance spaces. The argument calls for preservation strategies that restore the link between narrative, object, and urban setting, ensuring that khayāl al-ẓill survives not as silent museum artifacts but as a living record of late Ottoman popular life and critique.

Maryam Heydarkhani

Barakat Postdoctoral Researcher, University of Oxford

Ritual and Space: Shi'i Ceremonials and the Transformation of Madrasa Architecture and Social Role in Iran (Safavid–Qajar Eras)

This paper explores the transformative impact of Shi'i ritual culture, particularly the ceremonies of Muharram, on the material and social fabric of madrasas in Iran from the Safavid to the Qajar periods. Following the establishment of Twelver Shi'ism as the state religion in the 16th century, the mourning for Imam Husayn evolved from a limited practice into a central pillar of Safavid and later Qajar identity. This shift necessitated new architectural spaces and redefined the social role of religious institutions.

Focusing on the madrasa as a key centre of institution for higher education, this study investigates how the need to host rituals such as rawda-khani (sermon assemblies) and ta'ziya (passion plays) prompted architectural adaptation. Madrasas increasingly functioned not only as educational centres but also as public arenas of Shi'i devotion, integrating spaces like ḥusayniyyas and tekyehs or modifying space to accommodate larger audiences.

The research employs a multidisciplinary methodology, drawing on primary sources including architectural analysis of madrasas in cities such as Shiraz, and Tehran; endowment deeds (waqfiyyas) that stipulate funding for rituals; and historical photographs and maps that document the use of space. By tracing this evolution, the paper will demonstrate how madrasa architecture became a dynamic interface between formal religious education and popular devotional practice, ultimately reflecting the profound socio-religious transformations of early modern Iran.

Amir Mahdi Moslehi

University of Hamburg

Inscribed to Be Read:
The Public Voice of Nastaʿlīq in Qajar Architecture

In Qajar Iran a new kind of inscription emerged on architectural façades. Nastaʿlīq, originally used for transcribing classical Persian literature, became the dominant calligraphic style for architectural inscriptions of the period. Increasingly employed for display purposes, it marked a shift from earlier talismanic or symbolic epigraphy rendered in less legible Arabic-based scripts. No longer serving primarily as sacred ornament, these inscriptions invited reading: their verses, endowments, and dedications addressed the public directly, transforming walls into communicative surfaces.

This paper explores how the adoption of Nastaʿlīq transformed architectural inscriptions from decorative elements into accessible media conveying political, social, and moral messages. It situates this transformation within broader architectural and societal developments, including the rise of privately commissioned buildings and new modes of representing authority and identity. By analyzing the material, aesthetic, and textual features of Qajar inscriptions, the study argues that their increasing legibility redefined the role of the inscription, from sacred emblem to medium of public engagement and political expression.

Persian Manuscripts Association

The Persian Manuscripts Association (PMA) is an international academic organisation dedicated to the study of manuscripts from the vast Persianate world. This includes Greater Iran, and all regions historically engaged in the Persian language and culture.

The PMA is a welcoming institution supporting interdisciplinary research and discourse in Persian studies across all relevant fields, including but not limited to history, literature, music, art, architecture, archaeology, codicology, paleography, philosophy, and the sciences. We are particularly committed to the support of graduate students and early-career scholars in the field, particularly by awarding research grants and publication prizes. The PMA is and will remain a non-profit, non-political, and non-governmental organisation.

PMA Objectives

• Themed conferences to foster multi-disciplinary dialogues among scholars

• Monthly webinars, delivered in Persian or English

• Shamsa: Peer-reviewed journal of scholarly articles and research note

• PMA Press to publish monographs and conference proceedings quickly and elegantly

• PMA's digital manuscript archive facilitates access to crucial resources held in Iran and globally

• Awards and grants to support graduate students and early-career scholars

Shamsa: The Journal of the Persian Manuscripts Association

Shamsa is a scholarly journal that hopes to encourage rigorous and comprehensive studies into all aspects and periods of the historically Persianate world (including, but not limited to, Iran, Iraq, South Asia, Central Asia, and Turkey). The journal is a vital piece of the PMA's mission to provide a forum for specialist colleagues around the world to connect, discuss developments in the field and exchange ideas and information.
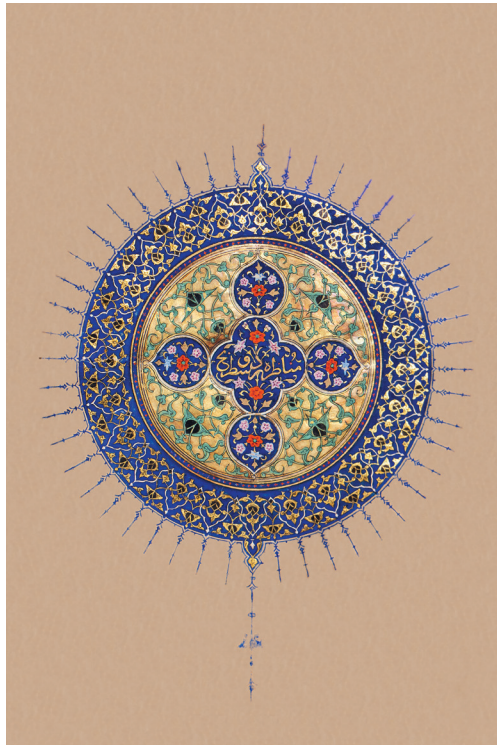
Wassily Kandinsky on Persian Art:

"Its simplicity is almost barbaric,
its complexity bewildering. Its elegance is that of a highly
refined people lost in sensuous dreams."
Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst Exhibition, 1910