Introducing: Cambridge Shahnama Centre Series

Shahnameh Forever

Imagining Shahnameh in the 21st Century

28 October 2013
West Road Concert Hall
11 W Rd Cambridge, CB3 9DP
12:00-22:00 PM

Sama Soltani
Gol-e-Ros
Hamid Reza Ghelichkhani
Sergey Feofanov
Veronica Shimanovskaya
Firuza Melville
Three years ago Cambridge joined the world celebrations of the Millennium of the Shahnameh in the version of Ferdowsi, the Persian hereditary aristocrat who for half his life was writing his bible: a legendary, heroic and romantic chronicle of his country since the creation of the world until the Arab invasion in the 7th century.

Ferdowsi’s cult poem Shahnameh, which can be translated as the ‘Book of Kings’ or ‘King of Books’, is a work of mythology, history, literature and propaganda: a living epic that became a symbol of national identity. Hundreds of luxuriously illustrated manuscript copies of the text exist in museums and libraries throughout the world. Some of the magnificent masterpieces from the British collections were displayed at the Millennium exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, which was supported by the Iran Heritage Foundation and opened on 11 September 2010, curated by Dr Barbara Brend and initiated by the Director of the Cambridge Shahnama Project, Professor Charles Melville. The Prince’s Gallery hosted a mirror show of the Shahnameh in contemporary art, curated by Fatema Zahra Hassan-Agha of the University of Sharjah, a former research assistant on the Shahnama Project.

The current exhibition “Imagining the Shahnameh”, is curated by Veronica Shimanovskaya in collaboration with and organised by the Cambridge Shahnama Centre at Pembroke College, established due to the generous support of an endowment by Bita Daryabari. It is not only a continuation of the previous memorable and highly successful Shahnameh shows, accompanied by concerts, recitations and lectures for specialists and the wider public as well as children: it is a part of a new initiative of the Centre to start a regular series of artistic and cultural events dedicated to the Shahnameh and its world, which we hope will inspire many artists from Iran and abroad to join us in the future.

The modest contemporary art exhibition at the Cambridge University West Road Concert Hall is brought together to support Hossein Hadisi’s “Zahhak: Dragon King of Persia” – contemporary music and dance performance, a new stage work based on Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh. We are grateful to the Iran Heritage Foundation for their kind support of both Cambridge events.

I shall not die, these seeds I’ve sown will save
My name and reputation from the grave,
And men of sense and wisdom will proclaim,
When I have gone, my praises and my fame

(Abu’l-Qasem Ferdowsi, transl. by Dick Davis)

Dr FIruz Melville
Head of the Cambridge Shahnama Centre
Sama Soltani has studied traditional Middle Eastern art and its relation to contemporary art. She is passionately interested in traditional Eastern art, but her favourite art movement of the 20th century is Surrealism. Surrealist figurative painting is a source of inspiration. Soltani is convinced that even though Surrealists didn’t believe in myth, one of the best approaches to illustrate Oriental myths is Surrealist, in which exaggerated figures and motions are common. She considers the combination of this exaggeration and the tradition of Persian art as her new way of presenting ancient stories that have deep roots in culture and beliefs. Sama’s creative aspiration is to paint some of the ancient mythical Shahnameh stories in her own way.

Anglia Ruskin University (UK)
Master of Fine Art 2013

Tehran Art University (Iran)
B.A. in Painting 2012

Honarha-ye Tajasomi Art School (Iran)
Diploma in Graphic Art 2004

Latest exhibitions:

2013 — 6one6 Gallery, Cambridge
2012 — Middle East Art workshop, Agha Khan University
2012 — Illustrating the Shahnameh by Firdowsi
Gol-e-Ros's creative domains are both within the scope of life and fiction. Taking after her mother’s fascination for the epic of the Shahnameh, she is particularly interested in its men and women of power. They love and devote themselves to self salvation and the salvation of others (whether righteous or not) within a particular framework in a society where people from different walks of life meet.

Gol-e-Ros has mainly been painting the story of Golnar and Ardeshir, and how she transgresses the morals of devotion in the court of Ardavan. She falls in love with Ardeshir, climbs into his chamber with the help of a rope...and changes his life and the world at the same time.

University of Cambridge (UK)
Master of Studies in Interdisciplinary Design (IDBE) 2009

Azad University, Central Tehran (Iran)
Bachelor and Master Degrees in Architecture 2002

Latest exhibitions:
2013 — ‘Stray artists’, 6one6 Gallery Cambridge, UK
2013 — ‘Subtitled’, 6one6 Gallery Cambridge, UK
2011 — Ladies Night at Byard Art, Cambridge, UK

Solo exhibition:
2011 — Celebrating the Human Connection, Cambridge Art Salon, UK


Semurgh. 2012. Mixed media, linen. 50x50 cm.
Hamid Reza Ghelichkhani started learning calligraphy in 1984 together with well-known masters such as Amirkhani and Movahed Hosseini, and received his degree with distinction in 1989. In 1994 he published his calligraphy reference book entitled A Dictionary of Calligraphy and the Related Arts and since then, he has published twelve books on the subject. He has also been a chair in numerous conferences and seminars. Having studied Persian literature, he has been able to access a high level of accuracy in his practical work and creative ideas, the fruits of which can be observed in his numerous national and international exhibitions. He’s in favour of practising classical poetry, particularly Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh. His favourite calligraphic form is seyeh mashq, since he believes that it is purely Persian in its origin; however, he is undoubtedly a master in almost all Persian and Islamic scripts and calligraphic styles. He is currently in Cambridge on a Visiting Fellowship from the British Institute of Persian Studies.

Delhi University

Arak University (Iran)
M. A. in Persian Literature 1999; thesis title: Critical editing of Hasan Sajzi Dehlavi’s Sonnets

Azad University (Iran)
B. A. in Persian Literature 1993

University of Tehran (Iran)
Advanced diploma in Theatre, Drama and Literature 1991

Association of Iranian Calligraphers, Tehran
Degree in Calligraphy with Distinction in Nasta’liq and Thulth 1989
Sergey Feofanov worked as a senior stage and graphic designer for the editorial board at the Central Channel of the National Russian Television (programmes for children) between 1978 and 1987. He also worked as a stage designer at children’s theatres in Russia and abroad. In 1986 he was the director of the project design of the Opening ceremony of the Goodwill Games (Moscow) and in 1987 of the National Days of the USSR (India). He is the author of dozens of animated filmstrips.

Feofanov has been working in different genres and techniques: from monumental painting, portrait, drawing/caricature and graphic design to sculpture. In 1990 he was elected a member of the Moscow Union of Artists. Since 1975, the artist has actively participated in many exhibitions and art fairs in Russia, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Belgium, Luxembourg, China, India and the UK.

Russian University of Theatre Arts (GITIS)
BA Theatre Arts/Stage Design 1974

Major solo exhibitions include:
2000 — “Phoenix” Gallery, Moscow, RU
2003 — Russian Centre of Culture and Science, Helsinki, FI
2009 — Exhibition Hall of Moscow Union of Artists, Moscow, RU
2000 — Russian Centre of Culture and Science, Helsinki, FI
2013 (Dec) Feofanov is having his first solo exhibition at the Russian Academy of Fine Arts entirely dedicated to the themes of the Shahnameh, and to the idea of Simurgh in particular.
Veronica Simanovskaya’s main interest is East-West cultural interaction. She maintains that the current state of contemporary art is being determined by the global changes in the communication of ideas and experiences, and that it often draws on a re-examination of national and ethnic identities by artists in all parts of the world. She is moved by the ancient epic of the Shahnameh as a source of great poetry and wisdom. Her bronze sculpture was inspired by the ancient Avestan story of king Zahhak, who, like Narcissus is so much in love with himself that he turns into a monstrous dragon-like tyrant and a menace to his people. Just as in Greek tragedy, hamartia – the tragic flaw of the protagonist – of self-obsession leads to his fall and destruction.

University of East London
Prof. Doc Fine Art 2013-present;
MA Fine Art 2013

Harvard University, Cambridge
ALM (MA) Humanities/Dramatic Arts 2012

State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering, St. Petersburg
Master of Architecture 1986

Latest solo and group exhibitions:
2013 — “On Freedom and Gardening”, St.Petersburg, Russia
2012 — “If This” London, UK
2012 — “Gallery 263 Portrait Show”, Cambridge USA
2011 — “Places”, Brookline Art Center, Boston, USA
Firuza Melville is Head of the Cambridge Shahnama Centre, Pembroke College, University of Cambridge. She is a graduate (BA, MA honours) of St Petersburg University, from which she holds a PhD. She left St Petersburg as Associate Professor in 2005 for a five-year lectureship at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford and tutorial fellowship and curatorship of the Firdowsi Library at Wadham College. She has been teaching history of Persian literature at St Petersburg, Oxford and Cambridge. Firuza Melville’s digital collages are her visual interpretations of her academic interest in East-West cultural encounters and Persian classical and contemporary literature and art, or visual intertextuality. Her works reflect the universality of ancient stories and their popularity throughout the Middle Ages and in the modern world. The story of the woman who falls hopelessly in love with her slave or her stepson exists in almost all literary cultures, later reflected in art and music, where the Hellenistic Phaedra, the Biblical wife of Potiphar, the Qur’anic Zulaykha and Sudaba from the Shahnameh evolve from the sinful femme fatale of ‘Attar’s poem or Andrew Lloyd Weber’s musical to the saintly virgin of Jami and other versions. Her “Zuleika in Cambridge” series is her javab (‘answer’) to the interpretations of the Shahnameh stories by contemporary Persian artists, expressed in witty iconographical spoofs (Siamak Filizadeh) and to the use of decorative graphic design combining all schools and styles established during the 800-year tradition of illustration of Shahnameh manuscripts (Hamid Rahmanian).