

## Shah Abbas: British Museum showcases Iranian heritage

By Karen Dabrowska

"He is equally at home on the dervishes mat and the royal throne".



Tombs of Shaykh Safi and of Shah Isma'il I at Ardabil. Copyright the Trustees of the British Museum. Photo: Ebrahim Khadem Bayat.

These two preoccupations of the focus of a major exhibition at Shah Abbas, a leading figure in the British Museum, staged as the creation of modern Iran, Iran celebrates the 30th described by biographer anniversary of the Islamic Iskendar Munsti Bey in 1629 are revolution.

The exhibition is a remarkable achievement for Neil MacGregor, the director of the BM and Sheila Canby, its curator as eight separate Iranian institutions have contributed and loaned artifacts which have never been seen before outside Iran.

MacGregor sees similarities between Abbas and his contemporary Elizabeth I, who consolidated the state religion, saw off foreign threats and presided over a golden age. "He inherited in difficult circumstances an unstable country that had recently redefined its religion and was surrounded by powerful enemies. Like her, he was able to create a compelling sense of a distinct national identity of which Shiism was a key component". By time of his death in 1629 he created an imperial power stretching from the Tigris to the Indus.

Religion and spiritual practices were important to Shah Abbas who donated 1,000 pieces of porcelain and 250 Persian poetic

and historic manuscripts to the Ardabil shrine of his ancestor, Shaykh Safi a fourteenth-century Sufi mystic. Some of his gifts, among them Chinese porcelain and mosque lamps, are on display.

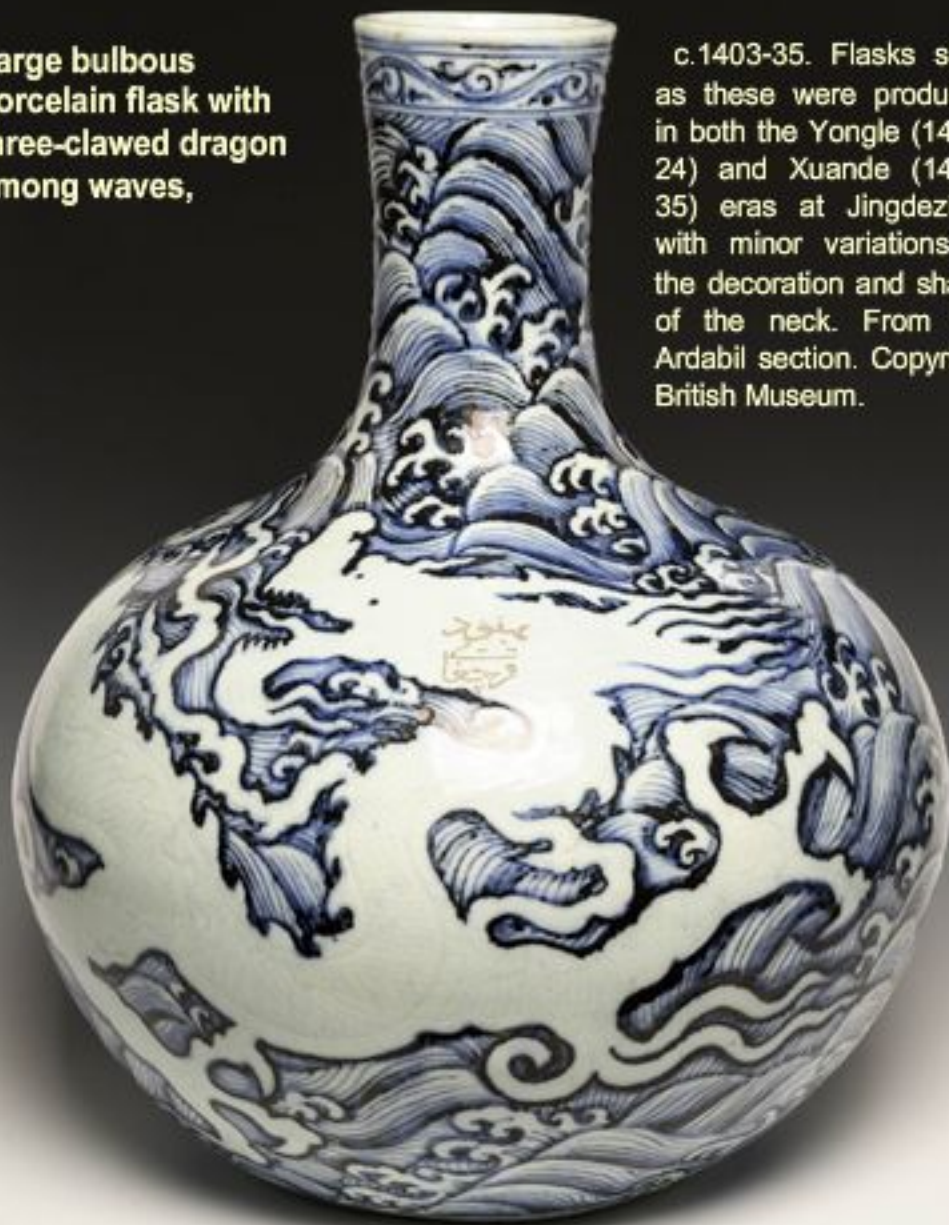
Shah Abbas, who came to the throne in 1587 as the fifth ruler



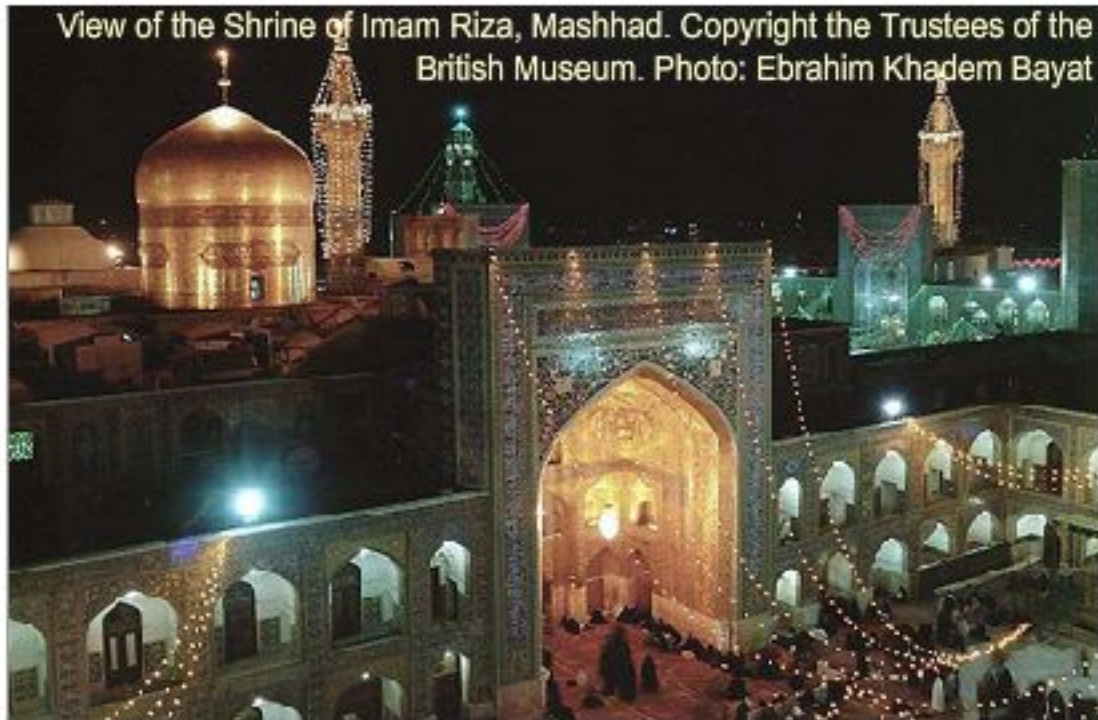
of the Safavid Dynasty, transformed four key sites: Isfahan, the new capital, the Ardabil ancestral shrine, Mashhad burial site of Imam Riza the only Shia imam (infallible spiritual guide) who is buried in Iran, and Qum the shrine city of Fatimeh Ma'sumeh, Imam

**Large bulbous  
porcelain flask with  
three-clawed dragon  
among waves,**

c.1403-35. Flasks such as these were produced in both the Yongle (1403-24) and Xuande (1425-35) eras at Jingdezhen with minor variations to the decoration and shape of the neck. From the Ardabil section. Copyright British Museum.



View of the Shrine of Imam Riza, Mashhad. Copyright the Trustees of the British Museum. Photo: Ebrahim Khadem Bayat



Riza's sister. Every shrine received priceless objects: Qur'ans, and, Arabic and scientific manuscripts and calligraphy. The exhibition displays many of the gifts and provides background information about each shrine, its historical significance and its relevance to present-day Iran.

The British Museum's exhibition, with carpets of silk and gold embroidered with precious metals, miniature prayer rugs, carpets, ceramic dishes combining Safavid and Chinese designs, wine cups and silk velvet textiles creates a penetrating of insight into the life of Iranian royalty. Although Shiism was declared the state religion of Iran in 1501 it was Shah Abbas who consolidated its preeminence through the rule of law and suppression of heterodox Shia sects and extremist dervish orders. The clerics in his circle established the parameters of Shia orthodoxy and strengthened the role of the religious elite throughout Iran.

A restless, decisive, ruthless and intelligent leader he either murdered or blinded three of his sons to ensure they would not succeed him before he was ready to go. During his reign (1587 – 1629AD), a new artistic style develop in metalwork, textiles, carpets, calligraphy and book binding. He also commissioned many public buildings which are shown as models or flashed on the walls at the end of the exhibition as giant slides. A video shows the various shrines as they are today.



Album page with two incomplete lines of verse, watercolour signed by 'Imad al-Hasani (Mir 'Imad), Qazvin or Isfahan, c.1600. Today Iranians consider Mir 'Imad to be the greatest exemplar of nasta'liq (calligraphic) script. From the Isfahan section. Copyright British Museum

**Knotted-pile carpet, woollen pile on a cotton foundation, Iran, 17th century. This large carpet is an exquisite example of a type produced in Iran during the seventeenth century. This example is similar to carpets donated to the Mashhad Shrine by Shah 'Abbas. From the Mashhad section. Photo Courtesy of Moshe Tabibnia Gallery, Milan.**



The Shah fostered good relations with Europe and welcomed foreigners among them the English Sherley brothers who feature in a painting by Van Dyck. Richly illuminated Armenian gospels show a tolerance of other faiths. The Armenian merchant class in Isfahan was nurtured to secure the lucrative silk trade. The liberal face of Islam: is also portrayed: the ban on alcohol was not as strict as it is today:

many of the pictures show drinking and wine vessels are on display.

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated book by Sheila Canby and a full public programme of lectures, workshops, family events, film screenings and gallery talks.

Shah Abbas: the remaking of Iran, Reading Room, the British Museum, until June 14th. ■