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Home **News** Exhibitions Galleries Museums Media  

Search

News

Interview with Dr. Ladan Akbarnia



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(Davood Khazaie): Well, Dr. Akbarnia, thank you for your time. Before asking some questions about Iran Heritage Foundation, we would like to know something about yourself and your achievements as an Iranian and as an art director.

(Ladan Akbarnia): Thank you for this interview; I am happy to be here. My background is that I have a doctorate in the art of the Islamic world, Islamic art and architecture, specifically, and I received that doctorate at Harvard. My particular focus was in the arts of Iran and Central Asia during the medieval period, the Mongol period, which comprised the 13th and 14th centuries. I've taught at university level and most of my experience has been as a museum curator. I came to Iran Heritage Foundation from the Brooklyn Museum in New York, where I was in charge of the museum's collection of Islamic art.

(D. Kh.): Being at Harvard itself is a great achievement, I suppose.

(L.A.): Well, that was a great program for me; there are two professors who specialise in Islamic art and architecture, so a wider range is covered and it's great for students who want to survey the whole spectrum. You know, I had a particular interest in Iran, but I became educated in material covering anything from Spain to China, and from the 7th century to the present day.

(D. Kh.): Could you explain more about your specialty?

(L.A.): It's Mongol art, basically the arts of Iran and Central Asia during the 13th and 14th centuries. I was very interested in the kinds of interactions that existed between Iran and China. Look at Iranian art. Many people notice Chinese influence or, rather, inspiration; I wanted to look at that relationship and see how that relationship under the Mongols, between China and Iran, affected the art and visual language of Iran.

(D. Kh.): How about the miniatures? Did you also study them?

(L.A.): Yes, definitely miniature painting is a significant part of Persian art, the arts of Iran; in fact, during the Mongol period the production of illustrated manuscripts flourished; one of the most celebrated manuscripts of the *Shahnameh* was produced during this period. Miniature painting is something that definitely drew me to the subject, but I was also interested in ceramics, metal-work, textiles—beautiful textiles woven from silk to gold— and, of course, architecture.



(D. Kh.): The *Shahnameh* manuscript you mentioned, is it the *Shahnameh Baysunguri*?

(L.A.): That comes later. That was in Timurid period. The 15th century witnesses another dynasty that comes to power in the Iranian world, related to the Mongols, and known for its great patronage of the arts, in particular the arts of the book.

(D. Kh.): Now let's turn to the second question which is related to Iran Heritage Foundation. Could you tell us more about the foundation?

(L.A.): First of all, Iran Heritage Foundation is a United Kingdom registered charity. It has no political agenda or ties. It is strictly devoted to exactly what its name suggests, that is, to Iranian heritage. So the entire mission of IHF (Iran Heritage Foundation) is to preserve and to promote the history, the languages, and cultures of the Iranian world. Anything that we do really falls within this overall mission. The foundation was begun in the early 1990s by a group of Iranian businessmen living in London, including Reza Rastegar, Mahmoud Khayami, and David Khalili (who has an extraordinary collection of Islamic art), Vahid Alaghband, and Reza Farshchian. Of this group, the person who is still part of the organization today, is Mr. Vahid Alaghband, presently Chair of the Foundation. This group worked together and created the foundation; since then, it has really become established as one of the leading foundations for Iranian heritage in the world. I encourage you to visit the website to learn more about it and about our past, current, and upcoming programs. It's very well-known, especially in academic circles and in the art world, as we support so many fellowships and exhibitions. In London, UK, it's also recognised through the many programs we support right here. Many of the supporters live in this region. IHF is the leading supporter of Iranian studies in the UK and is becoming increasingly recognized as such abroad. We like to support international programs as much as we do United Kingdom-based programs, but of course the core and our core support is right here. Hopefully, at some point, we will be able to have international branches so that other people, such as Iranian Americans, or perhaps German Americans!, who want to support the foundation may be able to donate within their own country rather than supporting IHF from inside the United Kingdom. The idea is to be able to act as a network for all of these institutions

So you have a group of men who got together and wanted to do something to help do this, to promote this mission, and to basically make it possible for future generations who didn't or couldn't live in Iran have a cultural legacy they could call their own, and to be inspired to help sustain that legacy for others. The aim is that IHF continues beyond the lifetime of those who started the Foundation. At the same time, we really want to support Iranians in Iran who want to have opportunities abroad, who want to gain new insights and expertise and take that back with them to Iran. We often provide fellowships that make this possible; often there will be Iranians coming from Iran to be trained in the museums here, such as in art conservation, or they attend university programs on fellowships. Fellowships can also be offered to contemporary artists from Iran. Hopefully, they can go back to their country and continue to be productive, benefitting the country in that way. So if we support cultural projects in Iran as well as abroad, we feel like we are accomplishing our mission in a more comprehensive way.

(D. Kh.): And when was it founded? Do you have any idea about the exact year?

(L.A.): The year IHF became an UK registered charity is 1995, but its original structure was founded in 1990.

(D. Kh.): Does the IHF itself provide donations to people who want to work on Iranian culture? And does it support the academics whose research projects are related to culture of Iran?

(L.A.): We do a combination of producing and supporting such programs and projects. We do have funds that we allocate each year to applicants that apply for academic grants, project grants, and large scale exhibitions. Last year, we supported a wonderful exhibition at the British Museum on Shah 'Abbas. Those kinds of larger projects we fund on a case by case basis, as we must fundraise for each individually, but we see that there is a lot of positive feedback in supporting an exhibition like that the one at the BM. People who may not have heard of Shah 'Abbas before the exhibition learned about who this ruler was and about one of the great periods in Iran's cultural history. So there are a certain amount of small grants that we give and then, when we do larger grants, we do a great deal of fund raising for that. I think because we have become so established and have become associated with top universities and institutions, I think a lot of people either hope, or assume that we might have a lot to give but we really go out and raise funds for everything we do.

(D. Kh.): Suppose somebody comes to your foundation and s/he is a student of Islamic art, and s/he wants some academic support by advising some supervisors or other possible guidelines from your foundation. Do you provide such a support?

(L.A.): Well, I could provide some advice based on my background and expertise but I wouldn't pretend to do that for somebody who wanted to advice on studying literature, for example.

(D. Kh.): I don't mean you yourself but the foundation. How do you support those who come to you for special advice on finding a professor with special expertise in art, etc.

(L.A.): Yes, we can provide that network and point people in the right direction. We also serve the community; for example, we support a number of schools of Persian language here. Our Future Generation Committee, which is composed of younger members of IHF, has been actively involved in supporting an effort to include Persian history in the curriculum for secondary schools, something that is not currently the case; basically, we want to be sure that history chapters don't skip the Achaemenids and cover only the Greeks! Their efforts are to not only support Iranian heritage in these outer ways that we see, but also to work from inside, or bottom-up, to go down to the first place where people begin to learn about Iran and to insert information where it hasn't been included before. I think these are things that we'll see the effects of in the long run. Our children will benefit from these efforts. I think such programs become our biggest successes because once the subject of Iran and its culture are an assumed part of the curriculum in schools, then we know we have achieved a great thing.

(D. Kh.): Oh, that's really great. And apart from this, in terms of the focuses of the foundation, does IHF focus on pre-Islamic or post-Islamic period or is it that wide-ranging that it embraces all areas?

(L.A.): Well, we have an Academic Committee that advises the academic projects that we do, especially when we decide to allocate grants for projects, fellowships, or conferences. We like

to keep a nice balance between the pre-Islamic or ancient period, the Islamic period, the modern period and the contemporary. With the current climate, there's a great interest in contemporary Iranian art. There is no question that we are involved in and excited about and we want to support Iranian artists, so obviously some of the programming that we do will be geared towards that. I personally find that this is a great way to introduce the younger generation not only to contemporary art but also or eventually to the art that preceded it, acting as a door, acting as a door into looking at more historical periods as well. So we try to keep a balance. Last year, we supported an exhibition on Shah 'Abbas, Safavid Period. This year we are supporting a major exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University on the *Shahnameh* because 2010 is the millennium anniversary of Firdawsi's *Shahnameh*. There will be a number of *Shahnameh* programs. There will be a whole *Shahnameh* theme this year. So we are very excited about that and we'll be trying to celebrate this with various programs and events throughout the year. There will be academic conferences as well as, programs for children and families, involving storytelling and children's books as well as a family day at the Fitzwilliam while the exhibition is on view next fall. These are things that we are currently involved with and hopefully we'll be announcing them throughout 2010. In the contemporary period, we are supporting contemporary artists and art, which builds from a precedent we set in 2001, when we supported the first exhibition of contemporary Iranian art at the Barbican in London. There have been several contemporary Iranian art exhibitions that have been organised since, including in the United States. All of this responds to a growing interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art and in contemporary Iranian art. Iran Heritage Foundation has been at the forefront of supporting this.

(D. Kh.): With respect to the kinds of art, for example calligraphy, music, painting, and even dance. Do you consider all these or limit yourself to some special areas?

(L.A.): No, we consider painting, calligraphy, music, all of the visual arts which you've described. We also support performance art. I think all of these are reflections of culture, literature as well. I see all of these as art. I'm an art historian, so I myself have always considered art objects but all of these are supported. I think we cover a wide range of what constitutes "art." Somebody might come to us and propose something that does not seem to fit into these parameters at first. An example might be certain kinds of photo journalism, which can also be art; we recently supported an exhibition called Transit Tehran that presented Tehran's culture through the eyes of the people who live there. So I think that definitely fits under the umbrella of art. If someone came to us with a very innovative idea for a project and show its connections to Iranian culture, then of course we would be interested in learning more about it. If we limit ourselves too much we would close ourselves to brilliant ideas that are out there.

(D. Kh.): That's right, to think of art as an umbrella term. You know that in Renaissance the term "virtue" in Italian was used as Persians use the Persian word "HONAR" –art- in many different respects. So it is better to turn to the meaning of art in a vast sense.

(L.A.): Well, "HONAR" as you know means talent, as well; so there is a wider definition to it. I think that in the west we have sometimes narrowed it down to something that you hang on the wall and we both know that it's much more than that. I would like to keep to the wider definition as much as possible.

(D. Kh.): I agree. Even in terms of etymology of the word "HONAR" a specialist of Iranian ancient languages, Dr. Reza Moradi Ghiasabadi has noticed and analyzed the term "ONAR" in ancient Persian inscriptions which meant "art" and then if you connect it to the English word "honor" you see that even their pronunciations are much like each other and most possibly it tells us something about the etymology of "HONAR" which is somehow synonymous with the Italian "virtue," as Dariush Ashouri writes in the introduction to his translation of *The Prince*.

(L.A.): That's very interesting. I never made that connection.

(D. Kh.): Now, could you tell us more about the relationship between the IHF and other academic institutions? Are you going to make some changes in the IHF programs in comparison with previous years?

(L.A.): Yes, we have relationships with major universities in the UK, including Oxford, Cambridge, St. Andrews, Edinburgh, and SOAS. One of the things we've done is that we've always given a series of fellowships out to various universities and cultural institutions, such as the British Museum, the British Library, and the Victoria & Albert Museum. We've always supported projects and fellowships at these places. I don't know if you remember the Qajar exhibition, Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925, which was the first major exhibition on Qajar art. It took place in 1998 and was curated by Layla S. Diba. That happened at the Brooklyn museum and was later exhibited in London, in both instances with IHF support. This year, what we are trying to do is shift our institutional support to a more standardized format. We are hoping that universities will step forward and meet us half way so that we can help them create positions or programming that will ensure that Iranian studies start and continue at these places, extending beyond just one year here, one year there. We really want to build foundations in various universities and are calling these "Strategic Partnerships." We've already started doing this; one of the examples is at the V&A, the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they recently hired a curator to care for the Iranian collection. This is the first curatorial position dedicated solely to the arts of Iran. Museums might have a curator of Islamic art, or a curator for ancient art, but not just for the art of Iran, so this is really something we are proud to support. We are also in the process of making official a similar partnership in an American institution, this time for a curatorial fellowship dedicated to the art of Iran. Both museums have great collections in the arts of Iran. Such positions provide excellent opportunities for curatorial training and help ensure that the legacy of promoting Iranian studies continues.

(D. Kh.): Could you explain more about this strategic partnership and anything special as the last word in this dialogue?

(L.A.): We want to open doors for conversations. We really want to see ourselves as a network. This is one of the things we do with the strategic partnership initiative, we serve as a network connecting the various museums and universities we partner with. We hope to be the thread that weaves them together and allows them to have more open conversations with each other. Maybe we can do this with other organizations, too, and not just universities and museums. I think one of the things that's wonderful about art and culture is that cultural diplomacy itself can do so much. So I think the more we can act as a resource, whether in the West, Iran, or elsewhere, for Iranians and non-Iranians alike, the better. I mean the more we can do to facilitate that, the more there is a chance to support and sustain a positive image of

Iran and Persian culture. We have such a rich and profound history and culture that it would be a shame for it not to be available for people to learn about and to engage in; ultimately, by creating and supporting all of the programs I've described and by being a resource for anyone who wants or needs it, we are opening doors into Iran's heritage and cultural legacy. Hopefully, in the end, this will have a positive effect all around. This may be a simple or idealistic way to look at it, but I do believe art has a lot of power in itself, art and music and people can work together in powerful ways when driven by their love of something, such as culture. People's hearts can do so much just by being open to each other.

(D. Kh.): Thank you very much for opening this conversation.

(L.A.): Thank you, too. I enjoyed talking with you today!

This interview was conducted by Davood Khazaie.
Global Art Magazine thanks Dr. Ladan Akbarnia for the interview.

For further information: [Iran Heritage Foundation](#)