A Privileged Insight

An evaluation of Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran at the British Museum

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A Privileged Insight: An evaluation of *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* at the British Museum

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Shah ‘Abbas was a brave choice for the third leader in the Great Rulers series.

The lesser-known topic attracted a smaller but dedicated and focused audience appealing both to those interested in history and those in search of an aesthetic experience.

The exhibition design resulted in high levels of engagement and many visitors left with the desire to explore the topic of Shah ‘Abbas and Islamic art further.
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1 Executive Summary

Shah ‘Abbas was a less familiar ruler than those previously featured in the Great Rulers series

Shah ‘Abbas was a brave and somewhat controversial choice for the third leader in the British Museum’s Great Rulers series. It is not a mainstream topic, Shah ‘Abbas is not a household name in the UK and thus Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran does not constitute a ‘blockbuster exhibition’ as Hadrian: Empire & Conflict and First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army did. The visitor numbers are reflective of this.

The exhibition attracted a highly focused and dedicated group of attenders, over a quarter of whom were visiting the Museum for the first time. The exhibition successfully satisfied two broad categories of visitor, those seeking an insight into history with interests in Iran or Islam and those in search of an aesthetic ‘feast for the eyes’ experience.

Visitors were focused and content-driven

The sources of information that triggered visits are widespread and hint to an opportunistic but more focused visitor. They might not necessarily be the ‘usual suspects’, of regular special exhibitions visitors, but instead are people for whom the publicity triggered specific personal interests, perhaps being Iranian, appreciative of Middle-Eastern art, or particularly interested in Iran as a country.

The exhibition poster on the underground was extremely successful in galvanising visits, conveying the dual proposition that appealed to visitors with interests in history and those more interested in aesthetics.

The relatively high incidence of first-time visitors and low incidence of New Intenders¹ reveals a significant proportion of first-time visitors who were converted to attend on-site. This highlights the success of the internal marketing campaign and reveals a certain amount of trust that new visitors have in the British Museum brand.

Whilst many aspects of the marketing material and visitor experience were positive, these findings also suggest that the exhibition didn’t always reach the mainstream market of blockbuster attenders.

¹ New Intenders are defined as those visitors who have not been to the British Museum previously and came specifically to see Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran
The segment profile was similar to First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army

Visitors’ main motivations for visiting and the segment profile of the audience were similar to the makeup of those attending First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army; a contrast to the less emotionally and more socially motivated visitors to Hadrian: Empire & Conflict.

Once inside the exhibition, there was little shift between what motivated visitors to visit and the outcomes they experienced; the proposition was effectively communicated and visitors arrived with a strong sense of what they personally wanted to get out of the experience and the exhibition successfully delivered to their expectations.

Many visitors were unfamiliar with Shah ‘Abbas

As predicted in the formative evaluation, many visitors (37%) arrived at the exhibition with little or no knowledge relating to Shah ‘Abbas. This finding alludes to a certain amount of prestige and trust in the British Museum brand; visitors are confident that the Museum will have selected a worthy topic for their attention, will enable them to engage with the unknown and are willing to pay for the experience. In addition, this finding underlines an effective marketing campaign that convinced visitors with little or no background knowledge to take the risk and see something they were unfamiliar with, conveying an intriguing and compelling proposition.

Visitors are attracted to individual exhibitions in The Great Rulers series

It seems that visitors are attracted to exhibitions in the Great Rulers series on a case-by-case basis; it is the content that attracts them rather than their dedication to the series. This is reinforced by the stark comparisons in segment profiles and motivations displayed between the audience for Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran and Hadrian: Empire & Conflict. Despite this, visitors are very receptive of exploring histories through particular historical figures and many drew comparisons between Shah ‘Abbas and other great leaders.

Visitors gained deep insight into Shah ‘Abbas as a ruler, but not necessarily his character

Whilst visitors came away with a strong sense of Shah ‘Abbas as a ruler, many felt that they did not gain a strong sense of Shah ‘Abbas as a character, ‘what he was really like’. Some were also interested in what life was like for the people he ruled and were disappointed that a social history angle was not covered.
Visitors wanted more modern-day context and some were surprised by the apolitical tone

A significant proportion of the audience were motivated to gain a better understanding of modern-day Iran, particularly in light of the country’s recent history. There was thus some disappointment that only the Legacy Film in the exhibition covered the modern-day context. In addition, some visitors felt that the language used to portray the leader was too neutral and that the exhibition shied away from the somewhat contentious issue of how Persia’s history contributed to the modern-day Iranian regime. This was particularly pertinent for Iranian visitors to the exhibition and the formative research highlighted the divisive nature of the topic between secular and religious Iranians.

A greater proportion of visitors were ‘researchers’ than with previous Great Ruler exhibitions and many intend to carry out future activity / personal research into the subject

Despite the avoidance of modern-day politics and context, visitors also acknowledged that the exhibition was limited in what it could cover, both politically and physically, and many left highly motivated and with renewed confidence to carry out additional personal research. Indeed, many started to unexpectedly engage in researching behaviour whilst in the exhibition and significant proportions had either visited or intended to visit related exhibitions and displays elsewhere in the Museum. This is a very positive outcome for the exhibition and highlights the depth of engagement achieved amongst visitors.

The exhibition design was accessible and provocative

Visitors were captivated by the exhibition layout and the multi-layered interpretation enabled visitors of all knowledge levels to engage. The variety of different artefacts and their presentation proved popular – there was ‘something for everyone’, and the variances in viewing angles, display cases and display levels added a rich dimension to the visit experience.

The architecture screens proved particularly popular, with visitors appreciating the innovative visual display that provided a stark contrast to more text-based areas of the exhibition, and offered an immersive chance to stop, rest and reflect. The carpet displays were also a success with visitors being ‘trained’ to link patterns to other artefacts in the exhibition.

The inclusion of some objects, particularly the china, was met with rapture and resistance. For some they illuminated the trade narrative and played an important role in contextualising the history of Shah ‘Abbas’ reign, but for...
others they seemed out of place and to the detriment of the inclusion of more Persian artefacts.

Whilst many visitors loved the immersive and reflective nature of the exhibition, a feeling also emerged that expectations were not fully met on the amount of real artefacts to actually 'see in the flesh'. For example, whilst the architecture screens were mostly praised, some visitors would have liked for them to be qualified with the inclusion of Persian tiles.

Crowding was not such an issue as the previous Great Ruler exhibitions and this was preferable given the small nature of many of the art and objects on display. Despite this some visitors still experienced problems in gaining an adequate view and many complained that the low lighting levels – whilst contributing to the overall atmosphere – made it difficult to pick out specific details.
Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran

Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran was the third in a sequence of four major exhibitions focusing on great rulers in history to be held in the British Museum’s Reading Room.

Running from 19 February – 14 June 2009 the exhibition featured objects never before seen outside of Iran, alongside loans from across the globe.

The exhibition explores the fifth ruler of the Safavid Dynasty’s reign through works of art, grand architecture and monuments which he commissioned throughout his rule. The exhibition focuses on four key sites which Shah ‘Abbas transformed or embellished as public statements of royal power: Isfahan, Ardabil, Mashad and Qum.

Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran was achieved in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation.
Schematic diagram of the Shah ‘Abbas and the Remaking of Iran exhibition
3 Aims & Objectives

The aims and objectives of this research were to provide an objective evaluation of the exhibition, comparative data across other British Museum special exhibitions – in particular the previous two Great Ruler exhibitions – and specific findings relating to the Museum’s high level research agenda of Attract -> Engage -> Outcome.

Specific areas to be covered in the evaluation were:

- Visitor profile
- Motivations
- Audio Guide
- Marketing and communications
- Economic impact
- Interpretation
- Sponsor awareness
- Visitor experience
4 Research methodology

In order to carry out the evaluation of *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* we used the following research techniques:

4.1 Audience focus groups

16 exhibition attenders were invited to the British Museum to take part in a focus group. All of the attenders had previously visited *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* and they were divided into two groups according to whether or not they had been to a previous exhibition as part of the Great Rulers series (either *The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta army* or *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict*).

Participants took part in an accompanied visit to the exhibition to refresh their memories, before taking part in an in-depth group discussion. The discussions explored their expectations of the exhibition, aspects of the exhibition design and overall visitor experience.

4.2 Exit survey

Surveys were conducted with visitors who had just finished their visit to the exhibition to ascertain a basic visitor profile, awareness of marketing and publicity, motivation for visiting the exhibition, behaviour within the room and the impacts and outcomes of the exhibition.

The exit survey also gathered detailed information about visitor spend, in order to assess the economic impact of *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*.

135 exit surveys were conducted during shifts from 5 March to 7 June 2009.

4.3 Rolling research

Questions were added to the ongoing rolling research at the Museum to ascertain awareness and attendance of *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* amongst general Museum visitors.
4.4 Observations

Engagement matrices

Using observation, visitors’ levels of engagement were recorded with six selected elements in the exhibition: the introductory text panel, map at the beginning of the exhibition, portrait of Shah ‘Abbas, carpets in the Isfahan section, Architecture section and Legacy film.

Firstly it was recorded whether visitors embarked on any level of engagement or whether they appeared to miss the object either because they seemed not to see it, or, despite appearing to want to see the object, there were too many people crowded round. We also recorded dwell time of those visitors who successfully engaged to measure the average length of engagement for each object. These techniques were used to identify which elements of display and interpretation were most successful at engaging visitors and how that level of engagement was achieved.

371 Engagement observations were carried out.

4.5 Vox pops

Vox pop interviews were carried out throughout the exhibition in order to test visitors’ responses both to individual elements of the display and to the exhibition as a whole.

Specific questions were asked in the vox pops to ascertain to what extent visitors understood the key exhibition messages and to explore certain aspects of the exhibition design and artefacts in more detail.

20 vox pops were completed.
Visitor profile

Where appropriate, this report compares the findings from Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran with the two previous exhibitions in the Great Rulers series - Hadrian: Empire & Conflict and The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army – alongside previous major temporary exhibitions such as Michelangelo Drawings: closer to the master and Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia.

It also compares the exhibition profile with the general Museum-visiting audience for both Year 4 of the rolling research (June 08 – May 09) and the specific time period of the exhibition (February – June 09).
## Visitor profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shah 'Abbas and the Remaking of Iran</th>
<th>Hadrian: Empire &amp; Conflict</th>
<th>The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army</th>
<th>Michelangelo: Drawings: closer to the master</th>
<th>Forgotten Empire: the world of Ancient Persia</th>
<th>BM Aug-Oct (Aug – Oct 08)</th>
<th>BM Yr 3 (June 07 – May 08)</th>
<th>BM Yr 2 (June 06 – May 07)</th>
<th>BM Yr 1 (June 05 – May 06)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Base</strong></td>
<td>135</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>3409</td>
<td>2705</td>
<td>2517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge of subject areas covered</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little/ none</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsewhere in UK</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Knowledge base

Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran attracted the same proportion of visitors describing themselves as having ‘specialist’ knowledge (8%) of the exhibition and Museum’s subject areas as with Hadrian: Empire & Conflict, however there was a significantly higher proportion of visitors with little or no knowledge, 34% compared to 16%, emphasising the foreign and ‘unknown’ nature of the exhibition content to many visitors.

Segmentation

The table below describes the MHM-devised segmentation system into which the British Museum audience is currently divided for annual reporting purposes.
## Segment table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Broad needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sightseers</td>
<td>First time visitors making a general visit. Mainly tourists who want to 'do' the museum</td>
<td>Ease of access, comfort, orientation, good facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self developers</td>
<td>Non-specialists wanting to informally improve their general knowledge about subjects covered in the museum</td>
<td>Journey of discovery, layered information, finding out new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>Mixed age groups, wanting fun and educational trip for children</td>
<td>Ease of access and movement, child friendly facilities and activities, different levels of service to meet diverse age needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeat Social Visitors</td>
<td>Repeat visitors, meeting up with others at the museum. Use the museum as a sociable space and want to feel a sense of ownership in their surroundings</td>
<td>Ease of access, comfort, orientation, good facilities, warm welcome, accessible exhibitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>Specialists wanting to deepen their knowledge further by engaging deeply with the collection</td>
<td>High quality access to collections, critical engagement, access to expert staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Lovers</td>
<td>Spiritually and emotionally motivated visitors who want to commune with objects in the collection, and use their existing knowledge as a base to go deeper</td>
<td>Ambience, deep sensory engagement, space for contemplation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The diagram below compares the proportion of visitors that fell into each segment at *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* to *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict*, *The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army* and the British Museum annual audience for Year 4 of the rolling research (June 08 – May 09).
Visitor segments

Interestingly the segment profile of Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran is much more similar to that of The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army than Hadrian: Empire & Conflict.

The exhibition proposition clearly presented both an ‘art show’ and ‘history lesson’, attracting a near equal split between Self-developers and Art Lovers, with just over 4 in 10 visitors coming from both segments. Families are more prominent than with Hadrian: Empire & Conflict, although this segment is significantly smaller compared to overall visitors to the Museum and The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army. Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran attracted very small proportions of Repeat Social Visitors and Sightseers, with the more intellectually motivated visitors dominating the audience profile.

Whereas the rolling research has indicated that the Art Lovers segment has decreased significantly across the previous 4 years of research (2005/06 – 2008/09 change of -14%)\(^3\), it is clear that the Museum is still attracting significant proportions of Art Lovers for certain exhibitions. With the Museum becoming known for high profile temporary exhibitions, they may simply be

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\(^3\) As illustrated in MHM’s ‘Segmentation Report 2008/09’, June 2009
waiting for particular special exhibitions that appeal on an aesthetic basis to activate them to visit.

Visitor numbers to Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran are such that the audience profile will not have significant implications for the Museum audience make-up as a whole as recorded in the rolling research. However, this does not mean that future exhibitions of similar aesthetically appealing—but perhaps more widely known—content would not have more of an impact overall, as was certainly the case with The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army.
6 Motivations for visiting

6.1 Hierarchy of motivation

We have identified four key drivers for visiting museums:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>See museum as a...</th>
<th>Have this driver...</th>
<th>And they seek this from a visit...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHURCH</td>
<td>SPIRITUAL</td>
<td>Creative stimulation and quiet contemplation, they see museums as an opportunity to escape and recharge their batteries, food for the soul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPA</td>
<td>EMOTIONAL</td>
<td>May have a personal connection to the subject matter, want to see fascinating objects in an inspiring setting, seek ambience, deep sensory and intellectual experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARCHIVE</td>
<td>INTELLECTUAL</td>
<td>Keen to encourage their children’s or their own interest and knowledge, may have professional interest in the subject, seek a journey of discovery, to find out new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTRACTION</td>
<td>SOCIAL</td>
<td>See museums as an enjoyable place to spend time with friends and family, seek ease of access and orientation, good facilities and services, welcoming staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At each level of the hierarchy visitors have different needs. The suggestion is not that visitors are forced or even led up this hierarchy, but that they get the opportunity to engage at the deepest level they wish to.

6.2 Main motivation

Using a series of statements on the exit survey we asked visitors to Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran to identify the main motivation for their visit to the British Museum that day. The diagram below shows the main motivation of visitors to Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran compared to the two previous exhibitions in the Great Rulers series as well as results for the Museum as a whole taken from the rolling research.
Main motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibition</th>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Intellectual</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadrian: Empire &amp; Conflict</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BM during Shah 'Abbas exhibition</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see from the above graph that visitors were less likely to be socially motivated than the previous Great Rulers exhibitions and significantly less likely to be so than overall Museum visitors during the period that the Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran exhibition took place. Rather, the majority, at just over half of visitors, were intellectually motivated and over 4 in 10 were emotionally motivated. Based on this breakdown, visitors to Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran appear to have similar motivations to those visitors to The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army. They are noticeably more focused, driven by a specific topic rather than anticipating a ‘nice’ social experience.
Main motivation (rolling research)

This next chart compares visitors’ main motivation at Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran with the main motivations of visitors from Years 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the rolling research. The contrast becomes clear, with those to the Museum overall being consistently much more socially motivated, whilst those at Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran were much more likely to be intellectually or emotionally motivated.

These findings reveal a specific type of visitor attracted by special exhibitions; they are perhaps more serious and are investing time and expectation in their experience, rather than a non-paying visitor to the main collections. Thus getting something in return for their investment, e.g. self-development or an aesthetic and moving experience, becomes more important to special exhibition attenders.
Specific motivations

In addition to identifying visitors’ main motivation for visiting the exhibition, we were also able to look at the proportion of visitors driven by specific motivators. Visitors were asked to choose all the reasons that motivated their visit – therefore visitors can be motivated to gain a deeper insight, but also to visit the shop or restaurant on the same visit.

Specific motivators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Shah ‘Abbas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To improve my own knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain a deeper insight into the subject</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To experience awe-inspiring, fascinating or beautiful things or places</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a personal / academic / professional interest in the subject</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To stimulate my own creativity</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel a strong sense of personal connection</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s one of the major attractions in the region</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To travel back in time</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spend time with other people in a nice place</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reflect and contemplate</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To encourage children’s interest in history</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be moved emotionally</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To use facilities such as shop / café / toilet / restaurant</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To escape or recharge my batteries</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most selected option was to ‘improve their knowledge and understanding’, followed by ‘to gain a deeper insight into the subject’.

Meaning making

Through our qualitative work into how visitors select and engage with objects in the museum environment, we have identified four modes of visitor behaviour. These modes classify how the visitor selects objects to explore and what kind of interpretation they need to make meaning from objects.
**Hierarchy of Meaning making**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Object selection</th>
<th>Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCHER</td>
<td>Specific objects/</td>
<td>Focused, specialist museum visitors, select objects themselves based on their in-depth knowledge of the subject area, want access to expert information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collections</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEARCHER</td>
<td>Classification/</td>
<td>Have good general understanding of the topic, consume all the information available in the museum on that subject, want museum to select and present objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOLLOWER</td>
<td>Narrative theme</td>
<td>Require a narrative explanation, want the museum to select and present objects which illustrate themes to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROWSER</td>
<td>Random objects</td>
<td>Select objects by browsing the exhibition, will wander until they find a ‘gateway’ object that catches their attention, require explanation of their selected objects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The four modes form a hierarchy, with each level of the hierarchy representing an increased level of engagement with objects. It is possible for visitors to move upwards through the modes of behaviour – the modes can be seen as stages in the development of a visitor’s meaning making skills.

Visitors who are continually browsing an exhibition can only making fleeting connections with a limited number of objects. If the museum is committed to developing visitors’ levels of engagement it should seek to encourage visitors to develop their meaning making skills by selecting objects and offering interpretation that propels visitors up the hierarchy and engages them pro-actively.

Visitors were asked a question on the exit survey to identify their entry mode; that is how they behaved on entry to the exhibition. The results are shown below and compared with visitors to Hadrian: Empire & Conflict and The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army.
Entry meaning making mode

Compared to the previous exhibitions in the Great Rulers series, visitors to *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* were less likely to enter the exhibition as ‘browsers’ or ‘followers’ and more likely to enter as ‘searchers’, highlighting their underlying intellectual motivations.

### 6.3 Time spent

The chart below shows the length of time spent in the exhibition by visitors with and without the audio guide. Time is a useful indicator of engagement as the more engaged visitors become in an exhibition, the longer they are likely to spend in it.
Time spent by visitors with / without the audio guide

Unlike the two previous Great Rulers exhibitions where those visitors who used audio guides spent on average 2 – 6 minutes longer in the exhibition, for Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran, audio guide users actually spent fractionally less time in the exhibition.

9% of visitors to Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran stated that they had spent longer than they had expected to in the exhibition, and the same proportion spent less time than they had anticipated. Those who used the audio guide were more likely to state that they had spent about the same amount as they had expected to in the exhibition than those who had not used the audio guide (90% compared to 79%).
The visit experience

7.1 Pre-show

Booking process and ticket collection

Visitors generally had a satisfactory experience with booking their tickets for the exhibition, with 67% saying it neither enhanced nor detracted from their experience, while 29% felt that it ‘slightly’ or ‘strongly’ enhanced the experience in some way. Only 4% felt that the booking process ‘slightly’ detracted from their overall experience.

Similarly, the ticket collection area was problem-free, with the majority (65%) stating it neither enhanced nor detracted from their experience and 34% stating that it actually enhanced their visit experience.

Queuing

Queuing was not an issue for Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran with visitors waiting on average 16 seconds to enter the exhibition. 38% of visitors felt that they queuing space had enhanced their exhibition visit in some way.

Depth of engagement

We judged depth of engagement on a scale of observed behaviours, defined as follows:

Levels of engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Success</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Static exhibits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Immersion</td>
<td>Spending an extended period looking at exhibit in depth, studying it closely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Spend time looking at the exhibit in some depth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsuccessful</td>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>Briefly consider the exhibit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactions</td>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Acknowledge the exhibit, but quickly moving on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Six objects / areas were observed as part of this research: the introductory text panel, map at the beginning of the exhibition, portrait of Shah ‘Abbas, carpets
in the Isfahan section, Architecture section and Legacy film. Visitors were judged to what extent they had a successful engagement at each exhibit.

Unsuccessful interactions were also recorded by the proportions who failed to engage, as well as the proportions who walked past exhibits, seemingly unaware that they were there and the proportions who looked like they intended to view the exhibit but were unable to due to the amount of other visitors already viewing the exhibit.

The levels of engagement in all the charts refer back to the table above.

7.2 Introduction

Visitors were impressed by the space and appreciated the build-up of walking along a dark corridor before emerging into the large, open space of the Reading Room:

I ... rather liked the shape. I liked the way you came in and you saw all the books on the shelves going on the left hand side. I liked ... the darkness of it and then coming into the open space Focus group attender

It was ... a contradiction. First is a very narrow, dark, place and suddenly you're in a very light place with the dome ... it is quite large and very impressive Focus group attender

You go up the stairs, and I think going upstairs is always an introduction to something isn’t it? Up these stairs and there it all is ... the other thing is because it's situated where it is in the museum, you've got the grandeur of the dome as well ... I kept thinking and sort of looking up and thinking had it been in a conventional room, I don't think it would have had the same aura of grandeur about it. It was certainly helped I think because of where it was put in the museum Focus group attender

I ... liked the whole set up of the dome ... the space and the room ... gave a sense of space and ... being enclosed as well, it’s a very religious feeling Visitor vox pop
Just under three quarters of visitors successfully engaged with the introductory text panel at the foot of the stairs, spending just over half a minute there. This high proportion of engagement highlights the initial motivation by visitors at the beginning of their visit.

Visitors were impressed by the large text and accompanying picture, and the introductory text provided a useful contextual overview that visitors were able to relate back to during their visit:

*As you come around into the exhibition, you’ve got that long, dark, black corridor, and it’s...you sort of build up and anticipation. And then you’ve got that wonderful, big, colourful picture with the dialogue underneath Focus group attender*

*It’s like the exhibition said at the beginning. He had two sides. He was very ruthless, at the same time a ruler who boasted the image of the country and the link to religion statues and the shrines and art Focus group attender*
7.3 Introductory map

The introductory map achieved the lowest levels of engagement of the 6 exhibits that were monitored during this research. Nevertheless, just over 6 in 10 visitors engaged with this part of the exhibition, and for those who did the map provided an important point of reference within which to geographically and contextually locate the exhibition's content.

_There were very clear maps showing how different areas had been taken over and ... claimed, and then lost ... I think throughout the exhibition you got the feeling of ... the tentacles if you like reaching out, and absorbing, and then back ... I felt there was enough of the geographical explanation really_

*Focus group attender*
The introductory area may have suffered from crowding, as has been the case with previous Great Ruler exhibitions, with 11% missing out this exhibit due to there being too many people. The map's position may also have hindered engagement as this object suffered the highest proportion of visitors appearing not to notice it.

7.4 Portrait of Shah ‘Abbas

Percentage of engaged visitors with Portrait of Shah ‘Abbas

Over 6 in 10 visitors engaged with the Portrait of Shah ‘Abbas in the Introductory section. A relatively high proportion of visitors were not able to engage due to the amount of other people in front of the picture. At only 38cm in height, this image was one of several miniatures featured throughout the exhibition and there were complaints that the lighting and crowds made it difficult to engage:
The miniatures. If you go [elsewhere in the Museum] ... one is able to actually pore over them! ... And these were very difficult. There [were] positions where you couldn’t see them, and the exquisite sort of binding and things, because of the shadow Focus group attender

The problem is because some of the displays are so small, it’s actually quite difficult when it’s busy to see it very easily Visitor vox pop

These issues will be explored further in chapter 11.

7.5 Carpets

Percentage of engaged visitors at the carpets in the Isfahan section

The carpets in the Isfahan section achieved the highest engagement of all the objects observed with nearly 8 in 10 visitors successfully engaging. Very few
visitors appeared not to notice this exhibit or were unable to engage due to too many people surrounding the display.

Both specialists and generalists found the carpets appealing and either used the interpretation to decipher the patterns or intuitively did so:

*"I think for me the most wonderful thing [was] the carpets, and also the explanation about how to look into a carpet* Focus group attender

*I already knew a fair bit about the carpets, so for me I didn’t actually read a lot of information about the carpets, because I’d done a lot of that in the past, so I was looking at them, for their beauty, but it was very good how it took out a symbol, each one took out a symbol, like a lotus flower, and the cloud sections* Visitor vox pop

**Visitors were able to make connections in the patterns**

Many visitors were successfully 'trained' to make connections between the patterns in the carpets and patterns found elsewhere in the exhibition, and the message that Shah ‘Abbas was asserting his authority via the distinct cross motif was well understood:

*[The patterns] were in the calligraphy. I found them everywhere really. In the tile work* Visitor vox pop

*It was a pattern and he wanted to stamp his own style on things* Visitor vox pop

*He was effectively attempting to set up what today you would call a branding I guess. Using the carpets to get his message across that he was the new man, he was in charge* Visitor vox pop

*It was patterns that he introduced actually across in the carpets, which was to reflect his reign, and also that he introduced silk carpets as a gift to the shrines* Visitor vox pop

It must be noted, however, that this exhibit was the first of a number of carpet displays, and that high levels of engagement with similar exhibits may not have been sustained throughout the exhibition:

*I thought there were a lot of the carpets. I looked at the first few that were down and then I walked by the rest ... On the first ones [I learnt something], but then I gave up going on* Visitor vox pop
7.6 Architecture

Percentage of engaged visitors in the architecture section

Although comparatively low levels of engagement were recorded, the vast majority of the 38% who did not engage appeared to intend to do so but were unable to due to the amount of people in this section.

[I didn’t spend very long in the Architecture section] because I couldn’t sit anywhere. They were all taken

Visitor vox pop

No visitors missed this section of the exhibition as it was necessary to pass through this area to continue the visit. The seating in this area meant that visitors spent extended periods of time in this section, on average those who engaged spent 6.4 minutes and the longest dwell time of all the objects observed.

It was my favourite bit ... I think I just sat there for about 30 minutes just watching it. It really made me want to go to Iran

Focus group attender
The architecture screens provided a contrast in interpretation

This area was seen as a welcome break by some visitors, providing a space to stop and rest, receiving information in a mainly visual format:

*I thought it was just really nice not reading, because you’d read the whole way round, and it was nice to just sit and look at the pictures* Focus group attender

*It was nice to have a little bit of a break on the way round ... the way the projection and the lights changed. It kind of perked you up a bit* Visitor vox pop

Although a text panel was included before entering the section with the screens, none of the observed visitors who engaged with the screens used it, and were instead more likely to use their audio guide (33%) if this was an option, or none at all (29%):

*I did wonder at the time whether captions would have been useful, but then on reflection I thought ‘No’ I think it was just the overall impression that was important, and a caption would have detracted* Focus group attender

The location of the screens under the Museum dome was felt to be very appropriate and added to the immersive qualities:

*[The architecture] was probably my favourite ... because of the way it blended with the dome, you get a sense of possibly how the building’s meant to be* Visitor vox pop

Visitors enjoyed the relaxing, immersive ambience of the area

Visitors enjoyed the calming atmosphere and in some cases engagement was to the extent that they were encouraged to visit such places in real life:

*The film show of all the different mosques where you sat in that area was clever ... I think it induced the feeling that it was trying to, of peacefulness* Visitor vox pop

*We couldn’t have the mosques transposed over so...I think it did very well and it was the only way of doing it. And it was enough to make me think ‘Yeah I’d really love to go and see that’* Focus group attender
Overall 69% of visitors thought that this section ‘strongly’ enhanced their overall experience of the exhibition, with a further 23% stating that it ‘slightly’ enhanced their visit. Only 2% thought that it detracted from their visit, and this may stem from an expectation that more physical objects, rather than screen projections, would be included.

Some visitors who had experienced mosques and similar architecture in real life felt that the images did not do them justice and there were others who were disappointed in the virtual projections, where the impact is once removed and diluted through screens, and were hoping to see more artefacts relating to architecture such as tiles:

_I understand why the lighting was quite dim but I was just looking at the photographs, the projected photographs of the Shah’s mosque, and they do not come close to doing it justice ... a photograph can’t actually capture what it’s really like Visitor vox pop_

_I think some people might have been a bit disappointed in this exhibition, because somebody said ‘We thought there’d be more ceramic tiles’, and that’s the sort of thing I think you see when you get into Persia, and the way that the British Museum got around that was by doing that big collage of things in the middle ... Which was fine, but as far as seeing artefacts was concerned, there weren’t so many artefacts to see Focus group attender_

_Well I felt that the major works of art in Iran are probably the mosques and the shrines and that they couldn’t really be brought here so they were projected for us. But that was a virtual experience and that’s possibly one of the big differences between this exhibition and other exhibitions. You know if you see something that’s awe inspiring actually there in the flesh, you go out thinking that you’ve seen something rather than you’ve just watched a television Focus group attender_
7.7 Legacy Film

Percentage of engaged visitors at Legacy Film

The Legacy Film was the last element of the exhibition before the exit. It received high proportions of visitors engaging, with over 7 in 10 watching parts of the film. Crowds were clearly inhibitive in this area as over 20% were unable to engage as they could not get a good view.

Many visitors felt that the film was an appropriate way to end the exhibition, providing an engaging visual aspect that began to relate the main exhibition content to modern day Iran:

It was a surprise ... as you come round the corner you see the stairs, and you think ‘Oh right. That's it, that's the end’ and then as you go further, there’s the screen, and there's a bit more ... there's a surprise as you go round all of those corners, and that was just ... the last surprise Focus group attender

I liked the way it ... brought us into the modern ... but the ... Hijab ... reminded us that in certain respect things haven’t moved on, but it provided
A privileged Insight: An evaluation of Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran at the British Museum

a good recap ... to the whole exhibition ... I enjoyed that last visual part Focus group attender

His influence seems to be still here today, that’s a fact I seemed to have grasped towards the end. You know in Iran. He’s held in high esteem Visitor vox pop

However, some visitors were left disappointed by the last exhibit, having hoped for something with stronger, lasting impact:

I liked the film at the end which sort of brought one up to date ... I felt that I was enlightened historically but I didn’t ... come out feeling elated, as I have from other exhibitions Focus group attender

Maybe there should have been something with a bit more impact at the end. There could have been some real cherries on the cake at the end Focus group attender

Visitors wanted more modern day context

Many visitors were driven to the exhibition by a wish to understand the modern-day political situation of Iran, obviously a fairly topical issue at present. There was thus a feeling of frustration that the exhibition did not relate more of its content to the modern-day context, and for some the film would have provided the perfect opportunity to fill this gap:

Well I thought [the Legacy Film] didn’t really explain [the connection between past and present Iran], but then I thought well it couldn’t really ... I’m still a little bit at a loss to know why we are where we are with Iran and why Iran is exactly where it is now Focus group attender

I felt ... they should add to the Islamic revolution towards the end and the deposing of the Shah Focus group attender

I would have liked a little bit more depth to it to be honest. To put it slightly into more context ... [the film] didn’t really explain the exhibition because it’s a few hundred years apart Visitor vox pop

It could have been longer actually ... it just gave modern pictures of what we’ve seen Visitor vox pop

I was surprised that the exhibit didn’t put it more into a contemporary context, and show how some of the stuff that was achieved then could be compared today and how we could learn from that ... the very end was like ‘oh yeah and today’ but what I wanted to see is I wanted to see more of the integration ... In all the different thematic areas, how does that carry forward to today? Visitor vox pop
7.8 China and trade

Although the china displays were not included in the observations research, several visitors commented on them and were mainly surprised at their inclusion:

I absolutely loved the porcelain ... coming round the exhibition, everything was fairly subdued. The lighting was subdued ... the pace was slow ... and suddenly, this magnificent showcase and the lighting I thought was perfect on it, and I couldn’t believe the age of some of those pieces Focus group attender

I expected ... more sculpture ... but what I wasn’t expecting was so much Chinese porcelain. I didn’t know about the Shah ‘Abbas so I was absolutely captivated about that ... part of the history Focus group attender

The trading theme was also somewhat unexpected and encouraged visitors to consider history from a new angle, adding another dimension to their understanding:

What I wasn’t aware before was the trade between ... Venetians and Persians ... lively exchanges existed much more before modern transport and private communication and I think that probably testifies the sort of unchanging nature of humans in many ways Visitor vox pop

As an Iranian, I read obviously a lot about Shah ‘Abbas when I was a child, but it was interesting to see how European or British people see Shah ‘Abbas or Iran ... and also the impact of the economy, trade ... political of British Empire in Iran and vice versa which I never thought about it before Focus group attender

Despite the exploration of the trade theme through the china exhibits, some visitors felt that they were out of place and would have instead liked to have seen more Persian exhibits:

The Chinese pottery was a bit dislocating ... I was expecting the focus to be on Iran, and I can understand that the pottery from China played a large role and kind of influenced, and was necessary, as they didn’t have the materials themselves, but yeah it just didn’t seem to fit Visitor vox pop

I think they need to have ... more Persian things ... the ... china ... was wonderful but ... one can see that in other galleries within the museum. One can see a lot elsewhere in other parts of the British Museum, and I just feel that the impact was not there Focus group attender
7.9 Timeline

The timeline was a useful contextual point of reference for visitors, especially for those visitors who were not very familiar with the subject matter of the exhibition:

The timeline ... was absolutely essential. I had no idea that so many other things were happening ... And it put things into context, and I think probably the way I was taught history at school. You know we started with the Stone Age and plodded our way through, and of course it was always very insular, and suddenly looking [at] that you thought ‘My goodness, that was happening, and that was happening’ Focus group attender

That timeline board really put it into context ... especially the little figures across the timeline Focus group attender

7.10 Shah ‘Abbas and the Pageboy

Engagement with the illustration of Shah ‘Abbas with the pageboy appeared to reposition Shah ‘Abbas in the visitors’ minds, adding a more human side to his character. The image allowed visitors a small glimpse into the personality of the ruler and provided a stark contrast to other areas of the exhibition where he is portrayed as a ruthless leader:

[The picture of Shah ‘Abbas and the Pageboy did change my impression] because ... you wouldn’t really have thought he’d have been a homosexual. So it did really make me think ‘oh there’s a lighter side to his personality, that’s more liberal’ Visitor vox pop

He looks like a very gentle person [in the picture with the Pageboy] but when you’ve read about all the stuff that’s actually gone on, there’s like two sides to the man Visitor vox pop

The Pageboy ... it made him a little more human ... instead of idealising the ruler, it showed a more humanistic side and more of his real personality maybe Visitor vox pop

I knew that he was quite liberal in a sense that he was very tolerant from a religious perspective, but I found that almost quite shocking actually, and the wine as well! Visitor vox pop

Although some visitors were frustrated that the exhibition did not cover the social history side of Shah ‘Abbas’ reign and would have liked to have seen
more detail about his private life (as explored further in Chapter 12), some
visitors liked the fact that this side was hidden in a glimpse of the Shah ‘Abbas
and Pageboy illustration. As such, attentive visitors were rewarded with a
sense that they have ‘inside knowledge’ and have picked up on something
which other may have missed:

_**I think the way they live their lives back then was probably different from
what we think anyway and if that was contrary to what we think is Muslim
belief today … It was a bit funny, that it just kind of popped up. It wasn’t
really announced. Like with Hadrian, I saw that exhibition, he has really
become an icon for gay, for the gay society as I understand Visitor vox pop**_

7.11 All engagement

The chart below provides a summary of the levels of engagement across the
six exhibits that featured in the observation research.

As can be seen, all six objects are performing or succeeding, with well over
50% engagement. Visitors appear to be engaged throughout the exhibition.
Rather than attention trailing off towards the end, visitors leave the exhibition
with around the same level of engagement as shown at the beginning.
Interpretation

Although, as mentioned in the previous chapter, there were questions left unanswered in terms of relating the content of the exhibition to modern day Iran, the majority of visitors were highly satisfied with the amount and quality of information available in the exhibition. In particular it was felt that there was sufficient variety to satisfy all interests and visitors appreciated the varying channels and forms of the interpretation:

I liked the variety ... of the exhibits, not just pictures, not just pottery ... but just the whole ... multi sensory approach Focus group attender

It was more interpretative than some of the other stuff you guys typically do. It wasn't just things in boxes. You gave it some context Visitor vox pop

I thought it was very well laid out in terms of the information it gave. It was very readable. Sometimes when you go to exhibitions, it can be a bit inaccessible, but it was very easy to understand the explanations with it. And the exhibits were beautiful Visitor vox pop

There's sufficient variety in there for most people to find something that's interesting Focus group attender

95% of visitors were 'very' or 'quite' satisfied with the amount of interpretation in the exhibition.

The multi-layered approach to labelling, with large text on the walls and smaller text labels for those who required more detail was appreciated, as was the tactic of repeating labels on different sides of exhibits allowing for a maximum number of visitors to view an object at any one time, although some labels were felt to be positioned too low down:

The labelling was very good. The smaller labelling I thought was very good ... in fact the individual labels were a whole lot more interesting than the great big boards Focus group attender

I think it's good to have labelling on both sides, because that does actually spread the number of people Focus group attender

I did like the way in some of the showcases, you had identical captions, descriptions on both sides. Yes, that's really useful. The only reservation I have is sometimes I think they would be useful perhaps at eye level, because low down if you've got several people in front of you, it's quite difficult to see Focus group attender
8.1 Expectations

The fact that visitors had to pay to enter the exhibition meant that expectations were high. Visitors anticipate more interactive interpretation and an immersive experience at paying exhibitions. In addition, those who had previously visited *The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army* or *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict* were expecting a comparable experience:

> [Paying for an exhibition, you expect] more of an experience like when you just go and see general stuff in a museum, you get bored after half an hour, reading all the things and stuff. But with this you want something that’s kind of capturing you, and taking you through a bit of history, which I think it did [Focus group attender]

> I was expecting something memorable like the Emperor of China exhibition, and I wasn’t at all disappointed [Focus group attender]

8.2 Free exhibition guide

There was high awareness of the free exhibition leaflet (68%), and uptake was also high at 53%. Visitors generally liked the design of the leaflet and found it user-friendly, however they did not necessarily use it during their visit, and thus preferred to take it home to refer to after their visit:

> I tucked it in my handbag and read it afterwards [Focus group attender]

> I took one home thinking I would read it afterwards, but I think it’s still sitting on my desk [Focus group attender]

> I love the fact it’s just black and white … I think that’s really striking [Focus group attender]

> I couldn’t get lost at all. I mean it’s so tidy, and tied in … so I don’t need [the exhibition guide] [Focus group attender]

8.3 Audio guide

Just under one third of visitors who used the audio guide recognised the narrator’s voice of Iranian comedian Omid Djalili and, when prompted, 41% knew of his connection to Iran. The audio guides provided an extra layer of
interpretation that greatly enhanced the visitor experience: 95% of audio guide users listened to the ‘expert interviews’ and just under three-quarters felt that they ‘strongly’ enhanced their understanding of the exhibition.

Visitors who used the audio guide felt that it allowed them to engage to a deeper level with various aspects of the exhibition, providing the option of having further information if required:

> I quite like the audio guide because it gives you more than what’s written on there. Especially if you want to go into more detail about a certain aspect, you do have that ability Focus group attender

> Because it was so visual, you had the impact ... the different types ... the curves ... [the narrator] was talking about the tracery and everything. I thought I got more out of that than the tiny writing I'd been trying to read. In fact it made more sense Focus group attender

The audio guide was attractive to some visitors who prefer listening to information than reading it, and the inclusion of music was welcomed:

> There was one section where it was music, which was very atmospheric ... I enjoyed that Focus group attender

> I definitely enjoyed my visit the first time. This time round because I didn’t have the audio, I didn’t enjoy it quite so much Focus group attender

> I like the audio guide because I don’t have to do so much work! ... so much reading Focus group attender

**The audio guide proposition is not clear to some visitors**

Some visitors chose not to use the audio guide as they simply prefer interpreting exhibits independently. However some visitors were under the impression that the audio guide was uninterruptible and would dictate their viewing order:

> I'd rather ... read it myself, and ... at the same time I can formalise my opinion ... perhaps I'm listening more to the audio than actually reading and have my own conception for what's happening. So for that reason, that's why I didn't use audio Focus group attender

> It's a little bit of an encumbrance ... I was carrying an awful lot of stuff anyway Focus group attender

> I'm not sure how it would work the audio guide, ... I'm somebody who might look at an exhibit, move on and then think 'Oh now, I'd like to just go back'
and I'm not sure whether that would be possible with an audio guide Focus group attender

8.4 Tone

94% of visitors were ‘very’ or ‘quite’ satisfied with the tone of the information and the language used. However, some visitors, particularly Iranian visitors, felt that the language and presentation of Shah ‘Abbas’ character was arbitrary and perhaps too neutral when what was being conveyed was a ruthless leader.

I think it was quite one sided, I don’t know much about the history, so I can’t really judge, but it does just view him in quite a positive light, and you don’t really get much balance to it. And occasionally it would slip in, he persecuted ... people! Focus group attender

I knew nothing before I came to the exhibition so it was purely this little bit about how he decided to get rid of [people] that made me think ‘Oh, not so nice’ Focus group attender

The formative evaluation indicated how controversial and divisive the Shah ‘Abbas figure is for the Iranian community:

[I would have liked the exhibition] to show different aspects of the society... it didn’t show that ... the negative impact of legacy of Shah ‘Abbas Focus group attender

I noticed ... that it gave you a one sided story. It doesn’t give you the other side of the story, which was the impact of the religion in Iranian politics and history. It changed our destiny forever ... You know the reason we have Islamic regime at the moment is because of what happened that time Focus group attender

I thought there were gaps ... we didn’t see very much of his wives, or his children, and it was slightly overkill .. about the china ... It wasn’t quite what I anticipated but then maybe we were controlled a little bit as to what was actually brought out of Iran and what the modern Iranian ... thinks about the status of women. So possibly of necessity, some of the things were sort of pre-selected before they got into our domain. That’s what I felt Focus group attender

The end film felt a bit politicised, this isn’t the place for that kind of agenda Visitor survey
8.5 Access issues

There were some issues surrounding translations with one Iranian focus group attender recounting that she visited with a group of Iranians who struggled to understand much of the English interpretation. On this occasion they were unaware that, for example, the free exhibition guide was available in Farsi. There was also demand for more of the displayed manuscripts to be translated into English:

There were a number of manuscripts that did not have any translation by them, and I found that sad. I would have liked to [have] learnt. I mean some of the love poems, and some of the Quranic pieces were translated, but not all the pieces. Visitor vox pop

I came here with .... a group [of] Iranian people and they have problem in English. I think if you write in Farsi is good because a lot of Iranian couldn’t read anything. Focus group attender

8.6 Great Rulers series

Visitors to Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran were slightly more likely to have been to The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army with 29% having visited compared to 20% to Hadrian: Empire & Conflict. Those who had previously visited felt that Shah ‘Abbas was a more specialist topic area with a less broad appeal than perhaps Hadrian, who is seen as more of a ‘household’ name:

I think they’ve become academic and scholarly because the Hadrian exhibition, it was power and conflict. Perhaps it was more popular in Britain, Hadrian having such close connections with building the wall, but this exhibition seems to be more academic than the Hadrian exhibition. [Hadrian] had more popular appeal, and this more ... textual, and historical. Focus group attender

The concept of focusing on individual leaders to illuminate ancient histories was very well received:

I think that the concept that the British Museum is taking, of looking at great leaders, and finding ways to make the individual bits of carpet, and tapestry and money more sexy for the common ... general public, it’s a good approach. But I think it needs to have that contemporary context as well. So
it was good at setting the historical context, but I think it feel down at setting the contemporary context Visitor vox pop

Well I think there’s always somebody that tends to pull things together for a certain period. This is Iran’s time you know. Similar people around in China and so on. And that struck me that there ... always seems to be somebody who’s a powerful force that brings people together and shapes them. He was obviously a very vibrant and controversial figure in himself, and entrepreneurial in his time I would think, and right throughout history [such people] actually create colourful periods in history don’t they. It was very good Visitor vox pop

I thought [Shah ‘Abbas] fitted in very well with Peter the Great, and the Moguls in India. So he was very typical I think of the beginning of the `17th Century Visitor vox pop

If you ... compared his career with an Ottoman Emperor, a successful one, they were remarkable similar. And you know the story of his family and dynasties, it could have been a Sultan, it could have been a Chinese Emperor. You know the killing of the families, murderous father. It was all very, very similar and it brought together just how similar different cultures actually are when they come into power. Power and politics. It’s pretty much the same wherever you are Visitor vox pop

Importantly it seems that it is not the series itself that has worked to attract visitors, nor is it necessarily the British Museum as a venue, but in fact it is the Shah ‘Abbas proposition, and with this proposition being out of the mainstream this inevitably leads to a more focused ‘type’ of visitor:

I was really interested, but you know when I tried to say to people at work ... 'I went to see it, it was really good'. It was sort of 'ah British Museum'. It just didn’t have that flavour whereas I think if ... I’d gone and said 'Oh Hadrian’s exhibition was fantastic' ... I probably would have convinced a few more people at work to go ‘Oh yeah I’ll go and have a look’. [Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran] was really quite narrow I think for some people Focus group attender
Layout & display

The size of the exhibition matched expectations

78% of visitors stated that the size of the exhibition was what they were expecting, only 12% found the exhibition to be smaller than they expected whilst 9% thought it was larger than expected.

Overall visitors found the order and layout of the exhibition to be logical and this greatly helped their understanding

85% of visitors described the layout and flow of the exhibition as slightly or greatly enhancing their visit. The order of the exhibition was found to be accessible, with visitors appreciating the chronological journey that brought them from the beginning of Shah ‘Abbas’ rule to modern-day Iran in the final Legacy section:

I think it was very well structured personally, because I didn’t have any idea about the period or the ruler and I think it ... guided me from the beginning to the end and ... put it in a historical perspective Visitor vox pop

The way the rooms evolved [was what I liked best]. The layout was phenomenal Visitor survey

I found the layout quite good ... you actually finished in present day ... the way everything was done, it linked everything very well. It actually made logical sense ... the pieces fitted together and then at the end you kind of get a clearer picture Focus group attender

Navigation throughout the exhibition was felt to be intuitive, however some visitors would have liked more guidance

There were few complaints of difficulties navigating through the exhibition, with most visitors having a clear understanding of which way they should go. A few visitors felt that discreet signs directing visitors around would be useful, however others appreciated the freedom of being able to wander unconstrained:

I found myself going back on myself, a couple of times, and I think the signage could be better. Like ‘This way’. It was a little confusing, because it’s laid out in a circular route ... We just stumbled around! Visitor vox pop

There weren’t arrows, or this way please ... you could wander back if you wanted to. But at the same time, the screens were put in such a position
that it was absolutely clear which way you really should go. I thought that was incredibly clever. The way it was done Focus group attender

Few visitors understood that the exhibition was divided into four sections representing different cities

Despite visitors generally finding the order of the exhibition logical, when asked, few understood that the exhibition was divided into four sections representing the different cities of Isfahan, Ardabil, Mashad and Qum:

[The sections of the exhibition were] his ... coming to power ... his life and his influence on everything, and also the history and all the trade and all the skills Visitor vox pop

Sections ... his religion, and his fight with Ottoman Empire, then his ... city of Isfahan that he built ... the donations that he did, and the finishing of his rule Visitor vox pop

There was an introduction about him. How he became the ruler of Persia and the conditions at the time, and if I remember correctly there were these links with China in terms of trading and the love of Chinese pottery and its influence ... on Persian Art, and then I think there [were] the two shrines? ... One was devoted to the Sufi ruler, who was the founder of the dynasty, and the other one, the Imam Visitor vox pop

It gave you information about the political and historical part of that particular reign and then it went onto show you the different aspects of the culture and the artefacts ... and the religion ... how it runs through everything ... it was quite subtly done. There wasn’t a definite line between Visitor vox pop

There was the history element, there was the religious element, there was the diplomatic relationship with the outside world element. There was the building of Isfahan element too Visitor vox pop

Multiple angles and levels of display enhanced the experience

Visitors liked the multiple layers of interpretation and the visual contrast in size and presentation of objects. In particular visitors appreciated being able to view objects from multiple angles and the varying levels of showcases / images:

For me [what I liked best] was just the variety, of the different exhibits. There were books, there were pictures, there were carpets on the floor, there were all different levels and angles, and sizes, and visually very attractive to look at Focus group attender
What was nice was the way the images of the Shahs were projected onto these walls so you sort of had some idea of what he looks like in real life
Visitor vox pop

I loved the way the porcelain was displayed. I loved the fact you could go round the back and see it from both sides Focus group attender

[The carpets were] another part of the dimension ... things up there, there were things on the floor, and the wonderful of those carpets ... absolutely beautiful Focus group attender

The lighting contributed to the exhibition’s ambience, however some visitors struggled to see some of the artefacts clearly

85% of visitors felt that the ambience of the exhibition space ‘strongly’ or ‘slightly’ enhanced their visit.

Some visitors were surprised at the low level of lighting but felt that this contributed to the atmosphere of the exhibition:

Well it’s dark in there but it’s got to be because of the artefacts. I understand that, but it actually almost enhances the experience, I think Visitor vox pop

The atmosphere created by the light and arrangement objects [was what I liked best Visitor survey

I think when you first go in, this sort of dim, religious light, you think ‘Oh golly’ you know, ‘am I going to find my way around?’ but you do get used to it very quickly ... I think the dimmed lights actually dims people’s conversation levels. So it was a very peaceful and quiet exhibition to wander round Focus group attender

However, for some visitors the lighting was too dim and they were unable to make out detail of the artefacts, particularly the miniatures, or read the smaller text labels:

Nowadays the lighting is quite subdued, and because my sight is not that good I have to strain my eyes ... to read and to see the exhibits. Especially if they’re quite small like the miniatures or the pages Visitor vox pop

I thought the lighting was poor ... it was so hard to read and it’s so small, that only one person can read at a time, so there’s a sense of frustration, you lose the flow ... I come to all your exhibitions, and I think this is one of the least good from that point of view Visitor vox pop
The low level of lighting, combined with some visitors having to strain their eyes to read, also resulted in visitors becoming less alert, and for some this subdued atmosphere was not felt to reflect the vivacity of Iranian culture:

I understand it has to be dark because you don’t want things to fade but it’s perhaps a little too dark because I kept yawning! It just made you feel a little tired. That just needs to be a little brighter Visitor vox pop

It was very exhausting ... whether that was about the low lighting, or it was very warm, I don’t know ... it’s quite gloomy in there Visitor vox pop

There was no space for people to stand and read. Not a perfect light, you can hardly see, or read anything. Plus the combination of the whole ambience. It was too dark and dull. It wasn’t giving you that richness of Iran culture Visitor vox pop

Thus whilst the lighting contributed to the overall atmosphere, it would perhaps have been preferable to regulate lighting levels in certain sections, enabling visitors to more easily pick out details and read captions.

Overcrowding was less of an issue than previous Great Ruler exhibitions, however some visitors complained that they could not get close enough to see the detail of the smaller artefacts

Although the Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran exhibition attracted a smaller proportion of visitors than the previous Great Ruler exhibitions, there remained some issues of crowding at certain times. Problems generally arose due to the small nature of many of the exhibits:

It was quite crowded in places as well. It’s just the way it happens I think if you’ve got time slots for letting people in that ... a lot of people gathered around certain areas, so maybe it just needs to be more strictly timed, perhaps run at 10-15 minute intervals, because people would kind of be leaning on to you, and really sort of pushing you against exhibits, which isn’t good Visitor vox pop

I thought the calligraphy was excellent ... if you could get up close, you could really see how detailed they were. The problem was there [were] so many people it was quite hard to actually see any detail Visitor vox pop

You didn’t want to spend a long time lingering over the ones that really you wanted to linger over just because it was so busy. Particularly because the detail was so small, you want to get really close Visitor vox pop

Generally those visitors who had been to comparable exhibitions at the Museum thought that Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran had been successfully designed to overcome issues of crowding:
I thought it was better than the Babylonian one ... I was pleased to see they actually had some spatial awareness about what they were doing with the exhibition. So that you could actually have quite a lot of people there and still be able to get through and see the exhibition Focus group attender

I thought it was very well spaced out ... you weren’t crowded by the people which ... sometimes happens Visitor vox pop

I avoid going to things where I think there’s going to be a timed entry. I’d rather wait until it’s less popular, because I hate just shuffling round and being rather short, I can’t always see possibly, and then I’m conscious of perhaps having to shuffle onto the next thing. But this I thought was much more user friendly ... you didn’t feel you’ve got to rush. You could stand and look at something really for as long as you wanted Focus group attender
Outcomes

10.1 Impact

The chart below compares visitors’ main motivation for visiting against the main outcome they got from the exhibition for all three Great Rulers exhibitions to date.

Overall impact

It is interesting to note that there was minimal shift in what motivated visitors to visit *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* and what they actually got out of the exhibition: the outcomes. This finding indicates that the marketing campaign conveyed a strong and accurate proposition, and expectations were largely met. A similar minimal shift was found for *The First Emperor: China’s Terracotta Army* exhibition, however results for *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict* reveal a significant shift in motivation to outcomes, with, for example, a large proportion of visitors going to learn about history but in fact experiencing strong and unexpected emotional outcomes through empathising with Hadrian’s character during the course of their visit.
Ranked impact on specific motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Pre-visit</th>
<th>Post-visit</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To improve my own knowledge and understanding</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gain a deeper insight into the subject</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To experience awe-inspiring, fascinating or beautiful things or places</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a personal / academic / professional interest in the subject</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To stimulate my own creativity</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To feel a strong sense of personal connection</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To travel back in time</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>+21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To visit one of the major attractions in the region</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>-4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spend time with other people in a nice place</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>+2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To encourage children’s interest in history</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reflect and contemplate</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>+24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be moved emotionally</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To use facilities such as shop / café / toilet / restaurant</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>+5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To escape or recharge my batteries</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>+4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest shift from motivation to outcome for visitors was ‘to reflect and contemplate’; only 6% actually entered with this motivation, however 3 in 10 experienced this during their visit. Another notable shift was that visitors unexpectedly had a sense of travelling back in time - only 11% entered with this motivation yet 32% experienced this during their visit.

Impact on future behaviour

Visitors were asked whether visiting Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran would affect the way they used the British Museum in the future. The table below shows the proportion of exhibition visitors who said they would alter their behaviour, and the actual number of visitors this translates to.
More likely to... | % of exhib visitors
---|---
Visit other related displays: The Splendour of Isfahan: Coins from Iran or Takhti: a Modern Iranian Hero | 55%
Visit the permanent Islamic galleries | 41%
Visit British Museum special exhibitions | 33%
Visit British Museum in general | 29%
See or find out more about Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran events and activities | 26%
Use the British Museum website | 25%
Find out more about the British Museum | 21%

These results highlight how motivated visitors to *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* were to deepen their knowledge and understanding, and how intellectually stimulating they found the exhibition, with over half of visitors being more likely to visit related British Museum displays. One third of visitors were also more likely to visit a British Museum special exhibition. This figure is significantly lower than the results from *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict* to which 66% of visitors stated they were likely to visit a British Museum special exhibition, and is indicative of the specific and focused visitors attracted to *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*.

**Meaning making impact**

The chart below compares how visitors expected to behave in the exhibition with their actual behaviour alongside comparable results for *Hadrian: Empire & Conflict* and *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army*. 

![Table of visitor behavior](image)
As can be seen from the chart, although slightly more visitors to *Shah ‘ Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* browsed in the exhibition than intended to, at the top end of the Hierarchy of Meaning Making, 10% more visitors than intended left the exhibition having embarked in researching behaviour, and this increase is unique to the *Shah ‘ Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* exhibition, with the proportion of researchers remaining constant for previous Great Ruler exhibitions.

This finding reveals that visitors engaged to a deeper level than they initially intended and may in part be explained by many visitors going to the exhibition wanting to understand the complexities of modern day Iran, as explored later in this chapter. There was also a significant jump in the proportion of visitors who went to the exhibition with the motivation to gain deeper insight (6%) and the proportion who actually experienced this motivation as an outcome (30%), thus visitors found themselves being unexpectedly drawn into and captivated by the content which may partly explain the increase in researching behaviour.
10.2 Intellectual outcomes

Improve own knowledge and understanding

57% of visitors to the exhibition felt they had improved their own knowledge and understanding. For those visitors with background knowledge the exhibition successfully worked to consolidate this knowledge, however it was also accessible to visitors with little background knowledge, providing an insightful introduction:

Well I went to an exhibition on the Turks that was given a couple of years ago at The Royal Academy, and I sort of got it in my mind, the Turks sort of metamorphosed into the Iranians, so I was interested to see if I could see any links there, and also links between Venice and Europe and all the trading, and I think that was brought out quite well Focus group attender

I think the comparisons throughout the world, I found that very helpful as well. I'm so ignorant historically Focus group attender

I think that the way it was done actually made you think, and that was part of the entertainment really, and the education of it Focus group attender

I like to learn about the people who have helped to shape the world that you have not heard of Visitor survey

It was quite informative because it shows all broad aspects of the history, the trade, the economy, the culture, the art, everything in that period of time. So it was really good Focus group attender

Visitors generally came away with a strong sense of Shah 'Abbas as a leader and understanding of his influence over art during his reign:

A lot of people in Iran regard him as a hero, but he was also a warrior, and he is a great leader as far as they were concerned, but he had his ruthless streak to him as well so I think he's kind of like a lot of leaders from history Visitor vox pop

He was obviously a very ruthless and at times a very cruel man, but that was set in the context of the times ... culturally and educationally and politically, it developed a lot during his reign. He was obviously a strong leader Visitor vox pop

He was one of the rulers with a bit of integrity wasn’t he? I like the humility of Islamic leaders Visitor vox pop

I hadn’t actually come across Iran so I didn’t actually know much about him. I think probably from a religious point of view, I’m quite aware of that
point, but as for the person himself, I didn’t quite actually... so that’s the attraction actually ‘Let me find out about the person’ Focus group attender

I’ll tell my friends of how he revolutionised Iran Visitor vox pop

I think he was possibly quite vain. He seemed very keen to stamp his authority but at the same time he knew that Iran was not where it needed to be, and so he wanted to push it and make it a great place Visitor vox pop

You can ... see from the later pictures that he was built as this mythical holy figure so you get the sense that was quite a great person Visitor vox pop

However, some visitors were disappointed that more of the exhibition was not dedicated to Shah ‘Abbas as a person, and some were expecting the exhibition to contain more content relating to social history:

To be completely honest ... the information was not sufficient ... I was more interested in getting more things of Shah ‘Abbas, you know his belongings. More into his lifestyle, and more research Visitor vox pop

[I have] a very small sense [of who Shah ‘Abbas was]. But it would have been useful at a few points to go into more depth about who he was Visitor vox pop

I’m not sure whether the exhibition was really about Shia stuff or about Shah ‘Abbas, I mean I’m not really certain Visitor vox pop

The only thing I’m rather sorry about is ... I would have liked a little bit more information about women in his life ... maybe women ... didn’t feature, or ... in a very minor way for procreation Focus group attender

But was he truly religion tolerant, or was that just a means to an end for him? Was he just politically manipulative? ... and you know the fact that he donated all the stuff etc ... and being tolerant of the Sufi’s etc. I just wonder Focus group attender

Where were the women? ... we saw him with a young man but we didn’t see him with sort of beautiful girls dancing or anything did we? Or cooking or playing musical instruments. Maybe they didn’t feature, or maybe they were just behind walls I suppose, never to be sort of illustrated Focus group attender

10.3 Emotional outcomes

Gain deeper insight into the subject

60% of visitors felt that they gained a deeper insight into the subject covered in Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran. Although questions were left
unanswered, generally visitors conceded that the exhibition could not cover all angles of the topic and several visitors expressed intention to explore particular personal interests further by doing future reading or research:

I might go to Wikipedia or the British Library to do research or read more about him, because the main part of Iran I knew about was late in the 90s but this exhibition has put me in the early 16th Century and the 15th Century, hence opening a new chapter for me to learn about Iran Visitor vox pop

I've been encouraged to learn more Visitor vox pop

I would like to read more. I mean certainly his historical importance was extraordinary ... his achievements; what he was like as a person, I can't tell Visitor vox pop

I've always been fascinated by the culture ... this [has] obviously pointed me in the right direction so I know what to look for when I go to the library Visitor vox pop

As an introduction to a person, yes [there was enough information] ... if you were interesting it could spark off other research and you can go and have a read much more in-depth about his life. But no I think it gave a very good overview Focus group attender

Shah 'Abbas is a man of contradictions who deserves further study Visitor survey

I went away and read a bit about modern day Iran afterwards ... the exhibition makes it all quite beautiful, but then you do realise that there are problems there as well, so when I see it in the newspaper, I will probably pay a little bit more attention to it now Focus group attender

I probably walked out thinking I'd like to do my own reading and find out, because it kind of portrayed him as almost a man for all seasons ... but was he really like that? Because you know you just get snippets from an exhibition and that's all you're getting so you know it did make me think I'd go out and read more about it Focus group attender

For a strong sense of personal connection or identity

11% of visitors went for and experienced a strong sense of personal connection or identity. Given that 6% of visitors to Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran were Iranian, the exhibition held particular significance to them:

There was an Iranian message, a modern Iranian message ... which was that we have this great heritage and we’re a country to be reckoned with ... almost explaining ... customs set in history Focus group attender
I’m Iranian ... I really didn’t know when Isfahan became Isfahan in terms of the city, I used to view the history and subject of Iran as a chore, but now I find myself interested in it Visitor vox pop

I’ve just come back from Iran, so it reminded me of what a good time I had there Focus group attender

To experience awe-inspiring, fascinating or beautiful things or places

Just over half (52%) of visitors stated that they had experienced fascinating, beautiful or awe-inspiring things or places in the exhibition. Visitors were impressed with the artefacts, and articulated strong emotional reactions to them:

The object which touched me was the black jade which I didn’t know existed. The wine cups, and the exquisite linear drawings and the borders which were so beautiful and it certainly has opened up my mind to a part of history which I absolutely knew nothing about Focus group attender

Those carpets were so beautiful ... I think beauty was very touching. You leave feeling lighter Focus group attender

I absolutely loved the porcelain. I was totally ... gobsmacked by it Focus group attender

To travel back in time

Just under a third of visitors left the exhibition feeling like they had travelled back in time. The atmosphere and exhibition design contributed to this sense of time travel:

[The main message I’ll take away is] and insight to a world that is gone Visitor survey

[The layout] reminds one of the ... narrow, winding streets in Persia ... these streets are enigmatic and mysterious Focus group attender

Seeing the past Isfahan [is the main message I’ll take away] – and I’ve been there many times Visitor survey
10.4 Spiritual outcomes

Stimulation and escapism

21% of visitors found that their experience of the exhibition stimulated their own creativity and 4% were able to escape or recharge their batteries. The visual art and projections were particularly effective in these cases:

I loved [the Architecture section]. Absolutely loved it ... I found it so soothing

Focus group attender

The art side has just blown me away. The beauty of it. The beauty of it all

Visitor vox pop

I was familiar with the history but unfamiliar with the art and architecture and this has inspired me

Visitor survey

One’s got to be tantalised by what ones sees and the wonderful thing is to see things put together from different parts of the world which I always feel is a great privilege that things are brought together so that one can see them

Focus group attender

To reflect and contemplate

30% of visitors stated that the exhibition had made them reflect and contemplate. With only 6% of visitors attending with this motivation, this motivation saw the highest shift from motivation to outcome.

22% of visitors agreed with the statement ‘I found the exhibition changed my perspective’. When questioned, visitors saw this exhibition as a chance to view Iran from a different angle, away from the prism of the modern media:

It has been interesting. I’ve watched things on channel 4, so partly I came because of that interest, and I think it’s much more fascinating and complex than the popular press ... make you imagine

Focus group attender

Thinking about the political aspect of the relationship between Britain and Iran ... it shows that you know they had ... very good relations that time, it wasn’t ... always like now

Focus group attender

I find the modern political situation in Iran a bit worrying, and I came along to the exhibition really to see if it gave any insight into how they got there, and we got here. That was one of the main reasons I came

Focus group attender

Several visitors appreciated the opportunity to expand their understanding of Iran as a country, in particular exploring its rich artistic history, and chance to challenge and counteract modern stereotypes:
Looking at the architecture, that’s more beautiful than I would have thought, because when my [Iranian] friends talk about Iran, it just ... sounds a bit barren, but to see that beauty that was really nice Visitor vox pop

I had no concept of the buildings that they showed in Isfahan, how advanced Iran was ... I didn’t realise it was a region that was trading back then Visitor vox pop

It’s representing Iran in a way that’s not usually presented in the Western World Visitor survey

I think ... Muslims were taught to be more tolerant towards Christians than probably most people would expect Visitor vox pop

It’s an introduction to an area of the world that you don’t generally get an awareness of being brought up in this country Visitor vox pop

My impression of Iran before I came here was I knew it had a lot of history, you know a lot of Persian history, but my concept of Iran is the present day one, which is very restrictive, and not arts Visitor vox pop

You tend to think of Silo development of countries but of course that isn’t the case. They’re very much intermeshed and it takes something like this to make you realise that that is the case Focus group attender

It ... showed ... the individuality of Iran ... some of the Arabic countries ... you might just group them all as one ... so for me it kind of broke that mould. So it was good. It was a good experience to know Iran as an individual Focus group attender

Perceptions were positively changed to the extent that some visitors expressed their wish to visit Iran in the future:

I’d quite like to go to Iran now! ... There’s a lot of culture, a lot of history there, it was once a great power, which is kind of overlooked because of more pressing issues of war and terror Visitor vox pop

I came with my English friend at the time, and she never knew anything about Iranian history, and she was so impressed that she said, ‘Oh I want to go to Isfahan, and I want to see Iran’ I said ‘OK I will arrange it for you then!’. So it must be interesting therefore Focus group attender
10.5 Sense of privilege

In addition to the outcomes covered in this chapter, and relating back to the perceived political tensions between Iran and Britain, there was an emerging sense amongst visitors that *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* was a one-off chance to witness artefacts which may not be touring in the future. Visitors felt privileged to be able to attend the collection, whilst mindful of obstacles that may have been tackled in mounting the exhibition:

*Thanks to the Iranian people for letting us look at their marvellous room*

*Visitor vox pop*

*It was something that I wouldn’t have been able to see otherwise*

*Visitor vox pop*

*It’s just something that I wouldn’t be able to see otherwise. Unless you go to Iran you can’t see these pieces … coming from the shrines and the mosques so that’s why it’s so unique*

*Visitor vox pop*

*I heard Neil MacGregor on the radio and I realised that this was a very difficult exhibition to mount. So I might not ever see the things that I’ve seen today in my lifetime, because of the politics that there are now*

*Focus group attender*

*One of the things I was quite interested in was that as soon as we got to the main entrance, it said that it was supported by Iranian Heritage [sic], which was an interesting point, you know, are they interested in us knowing what their heritage is? They must be. So that’s a very positive thing*

*Focus group attender*
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