Isfahan, the most beautiful city in Iran, has a long and venerable history. Long before Shah ʿAbbas made the city his capital and constructed mosques, palaces and sporting grounds, Isfahan contained Sasanian bridges and Seljuq mosques. Speakers present high points of the archaeology, architecture and art of Isfahan.

_Sponsored by the Altajir Trust_

**PROGRAMME**

09.30–10.00 Registration

10.00–10.45 Introduction
_James Allan, Professor of Eastern Art, The Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford_

Islamic Isfahan has had a very rich, cultural history. Architecturally, one might highlight a 10th-century Buyid portal, a magnificent Friday Mosque, much of it Seljuq, a number of 14th-century Il-Khanid religious buildings, and the Safavid mosques, bazaar, palaces, bridges, and the churches of the Armenian suburb of New Julfa, many associated with Shah ʿAbbas’s reign and the establishment of Isfahan as the nation’s capital. However, during Safavid times Isfahan was also a city of gardens, and a major centre for the craft industries: arms and armour, silversmithing, carpets and ceramics. This introductory lecture will give an overview of this remarkable city.

10.45–11.30 History of Isfahan through textual evidence and archaeological finds
_Shahrokh Razmjou, Lecturer, University of Tehran_

Isfahan is one of the oldest settlements in Iran, but there is little evidence about its ancient history. The pre-Islamic history of Isfahan is overshadowed by the magnificent art and architecture of post-Islamic era and notably the Safavid period. Therefore very few excavations were focused on pre-Islamic Isfahan. The scattered evidence of archaeological finds and several textual sources from ancient and Medieval times show that pre-Islamic Isfahan was an important place with a considerable history. A part of its history is mixed with myths, but from behind the mask of such stories some historical facts can be recognised that are supported with some archaeological finds.

11.30–12.00 Break

12.00–12.45 Sacred sites of kingship: rethinking the architectural plan of Safavid Isfahan
_Sussan Babaie, Historian of art and architecture of Islamic world, Visiting Scholar at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles_

When Sir Thomas Herbert visited Isfahan in 1628, he singled out the magnificence of the city’s public square, noting that ‘The Maydan is without doubt as spacious, pleasant and aromatic a market as any in the universe.’ The Maydan-e Naqsh-e Jahan (Picture of The World Square), with its bazaars, mosques and the palace, and its open public space dedicated to daily markets, court-sponsored spectacles and polo, was the quintessence of an extraordinary venture in architecture and urbanism that made Isfahan among the most famous cities in the 17th century. Isfahan and the Maydan are generally understood as representations of a political impulse, a desire to establish an imperial capital city that would rival its contemporary Constantinople or Agra. New research suggests other impulses and alternate readings of the architectural scheme of the Maydan. This talk reconsiders the Maydan, its architectural features and functions, and especially its famously skewed axis vis-à-vis its two mosques as the imprint of a spiritual mapping of Safavid kingship.
12.45–14.00 Lunch: please make your own arrangements

14.00–14.45 The Medieval architecture of Isfahan
Bernard O’Kane, Professor of Islamic art and architecture, The American University in Cairo
Unlike many other Iranian cities, as its myriad standing minarets attest, Isfahan has not suffered from earthquakes, and so retains one of the richest Medieval architectural legacies of any Islamic city. One masterpiece, the Friday Mosque or Masjid-i Jami, encapsulates the legacy from pre-Safavid dynasties, comprising innovative material from the Saljuq, Ilkhanid and Muzaffarid periods. Tucked away in many parts of the old city are innovative architectural gems, including mausoleums, madrasas, mosques and minarets. This talk will situate this legacy within the Islamic architectural history of Iran as a whole.

14.45–15.30 Safavid fashion – a confident fusion of textiles and dress
Jennifer Scarce, Honorary Lecturer in Middle Eastern Cultures, Faculty of Duncan of Jordan College of Art and Design, University of Dundee
Iran has a long and distinguished tradition of textiles and dress. The rulers carved in the rock reliefs of the Sasanian period (dating from the 3rd to 7th centuries) are shown wearing finely pleated garments of richly decorated fabrics. The record, however, for following centuries is not consistent as few precious fragments of textiles have survived, while representations in manuscript illustration vary according to the skill of the artist and the conventions used. There is more evidence for the development of dress during the Safavid period, especially of the 17th century. There are more textiles and some examples of complete garments, plenty of illustrations in both manuscripts of epic and romantic literature and albums of single figure studies, references in Persian language sources and the detailed descriptions of clothing in the accounts of the European diplomats, traders and artisans who visited Iran in increasing numbers. Examining and using all of these resources critically, this talk aims to give a survey of the main lines of development of the rich dress culture of Safavid Iran, concentrating on Isfahan as a fashion leader.

15.30–16.00 Break

16.00–16.45 Isfahan miniatures, manuscripts and artisans
Olga Vasilyeva, Curator of Oriental Collections, Manuscript Department, The National Library of Russia, St Petersburg
Traditionally Shah `Abbas kept a book workshop-kitabkhana. It was led in turn by the painter Sadiq-beg Afshar and the Shah’s favourite calligrapher, Ali-Riza-yi Abbasi. Best known, however, are the calligrapher Mir Imad al-Hasani and the painter Aqa Riza (the latter signing his works as Riza-yi Abbasi). He died in 1635, leaving, in addition to multiple splendid works, a school, and a plethora of pupils, such as Muhammad-Qasim, Afzal al-Husaini and Riza-yi Musavvir. The book production was not strongly supported by the Shah, and the masters had an opportunity to work ‘for the market’. As a result complete books are quite uncommon for the kitabkhana of `Abbas. On the other hand, numerous calligraphic samples and miniatures and drawings on single sheets were dispersed among connoisseurs of art. Nevertheless many pieces were gathered in albums — muraqqa. This lecture will be illustrated with the works of above mentioned masters, mostly housed in the National Library of Russia.

17.00–18.30 Reception

The programme is subject to change.
Please note that the cloakroom is open 10.00–17.30

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