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Collector profile: Abolala Soudavar – bibliophily in the blood

His great Persian manuscript paintings are now on loan to the Sackler

Jason Edward Kaufman

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Abolala Soudavar left his native Iran in 1979, one year after the revolution, never to return. He moved to Houston, Texas, where he runs a successful furniture company. But he has entertained more scholarly interests as well.

His grandfather Hussein Malek, a famed bibliophile, helped establish the Malek Public Library, the principal manuscript repository in Iran. Following in that tradition, during the last twenty-five years, Abolala and other members of the family—his mother Ezzat-Malek Soudavar in Teheran, his sister Fatima in Geneva, and his brother Hussein-Ali in Montreal—have assembled several hundred fourteenth- to nineteenth-century Persian and Mughal paintings and illustrated books which form the Art and History Trust Collection.

A pivotal event in his own career was the gift to the Metropolitan of pages from the magnificent

Shahname that belonged to Arthur Houghton. “Stuart Carey Welch [formerly of Harvard] published an amazing, beautifully illustrated book that provided me with my first encounter with what I recognised as an incredibly interesting field from my own culture”, he recalls. “Two or three years later, P&D Colnaghi in London began to offer works from the collection of American scholar Edwin Binney III and from the Rothschild family collection. So, at Colnaghi’s in 1976 you had an incredible concentration of major works of art, and my family saw an opportunity to acquire what became the core—almost half—of our collection”.

Their other sources have been Christie’s and Sotheby’s in London, and to a lesser degree, dealers who operate in Iran and abroad.

“It is a small market and laws of supply and demand create huge variations”, he observes. “In 1976-79, while there was oil money in the Iranian economy, typically you had new fortunes combined with a certain national chauvinism, so prices were quite high. After the revolution that interest disappeared, and by 1985 you had almost a crash, and things would go for 10% or 20% of their previous value. In the past three or four years there has been substantial interest, and while it is still thin, it has resulted in some competition, and in some instances back to pre-revolutionary prices—as was the case recently when many of the remaining Houghton pages went back to Iran in exchange for a De Kooning painting”.

Since early 1994, the collection has been on deposit at the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. According to Mr Soudavar, “Contractually the loan is for five years and probably will be renewed for another five years. But it may be for ever”, he adds, explaining, “We need to find a suitable home for this collection, and the Sackler is one of the best institutions in the US”.

“This may well be the last great collection of Persian paintings that will be put together in private hands”, says Thomas Lentz, deputy director of the Smithsonian’s Freer and Sackler Galleries. He notes that in combination with the celebrated Vever Collection, acquired in 1986, the Smithsonian now boasts some of the finest holdings of Islamic book arts in North America, joining institutions such as the Metropolitan, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University Art Museums.

The Sackler is holding an exhibition of some 150 paintings, drawings, manuscripts, calligraphies, and assorted objects from the Art and History Trust Collection. Among the highlights are four pages from the sixteenth-century Houghton Shahname, and two colossal

fourteenth-century Koran pages, nearly six by four feet each, believed to have belonged to a leviathan volume commissioned by the warlord Timur (Tamerlane) for a mosque in his capital Samarqand. Also outstanding are a copy of the fifteenth-century Golestan of Sa'di which belonged to Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, builder of the Taj Mahal, two fifteenth-century Mughal miniatures incorporated into the seventeenth-century Golshan Album, and an assortment of sixteenth- to seventeenth-century album paintings and drawings, including one of the largest groups of reed-pen and colour figures by the Persian master Reza-e Abbasi.

Mr Soudavar still keeps an eye out for interesting material, but now seems content to know that the family treasures are in good hands. "The purpose of the collection was not only for display as works of art, but also to enhance knowledge and interest in Persian history. The Sackler is an institution which is active in both of these fields", he says. The Sackler has honoured his generosity by appointing Mr Soudavar to the museum's visiting committee. The Art and History Trust Collection will be on view from until early April 1997.

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