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For Immediate Use
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Fowler Museum to present a major exhibition on the history of Iranian Jews

Opening Day Community Celebration: Sun, Oct. 21, 2012



Torah finials, central and western Iran, early 20th century, cut and engraved silver, 26.9 x 11 cm., Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv

Since ancient times, Iran has been a mosaic of ethnicities, religions, cultures, and languages. *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*—on display at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from Oct. 21, 2012–Mar. 10, 2013—tells the rich and complex history of one of the world’s oldest Jewish communities, which dates back some 2,700 years since the first Jews exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia settled in the Persian sphere.

More than one hundred objects including archaeological artifacts, impressive illuminated manuscripts, beautiful Judaica and amulets, paintings, photographs, videos, and documentary ephemera are presented in the Fowler’s Lucas Gallery to highlight the key features of the long, complicated, and vibrant history of Jews living in Iran. The exhibition begins with the biblical story of Esther, who heroically foiled a plot to exterminate the Jews of the ancient Persian city of Shushan. Iranian Jews identify strongly with Esther and she is remembered through beautiful renditions of the book telling her story, amulets seeking her protection, and her tomb, which is still a pilgrimage site today.

Muslims conquered Persia in the seventh century CE and the lives of Jews there became progressively difficult. In the early sixteenth century the Safavid kingdom rose to power establishing strict Shiite Islamic doctrine, which discriminated against Iran’s religious minorities. Conditions

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worsened for the Jews, and the exhibition uses objects to illustrate life in the Jewish quarter (*mahale*) of various cities and some of the constraints caused by Shiite edicts. A section is dedicated to the professions forbidden to Muslims and practiced by Jews, such as working as peddlers, used-clothing vendors, jewelry makers, producers and sellers of wine, and musicians and entertainers, in addition to those Jews who still worked as doctors, healers, and merchants.

Ironically, these circumstances lead the Jews of Iran to play a key role in preserving the legacy of classical Persian music and poetry (both forbidden to Muslims under Shiite law), and *Light and Shadows* features traditional instruments such as the *tār*, *setār*, and *santūr* and offers several examples of recorded musical compositions. Because the Jews were considered to be “People of the Book,” they valued literacy in both religious and secular texts. Persian literature was integral to Jewish community life, and the exhibition includes rare illuminated manuscripts and books.

In the mid-1800s the Jews living in the city of Mashhad were forced to convert to Islam. As a result, many of them lived double lives, practicing Islam in public but privately maintaining Jewish customs. A special section focuses on the distinctive experiences of the “crypto-Jews” of Mashhad and includes miniature phylacteries worn covertly under a headdress; lavish garments for child-brides, who were betrothed at an early age to avoid marriages to Muslims later in life; and pairs of elaborately decorated marriage contracts, a Jewish version in Hebrew and a Muslim version in Persian.

A final section in the Lucas Gallery highlights a range of objects associated with religious practices, ceremonies, and rituals, which have a distinctive Iranian Jewish style. The consecrated space of the synagogue holds a prescribed set of religious objects and *Light and Shadows* includes an ornamented cabinet in which the Torah scrolls are kept as well as a number of their silver finials, decorated with recognizably Persian motifs. Wedding ceremonies were a hybrid of Jewish and Persian traditions and were designed to ensure the health and well-being of the young couple. Each marriage was sealed with a formal contract (*ketubah*), among the most beautiful of Persian Jewish illuminated documents. Lastly, the Jews of Iran wore amulets to confer protection against harm and promote healing, and the exhibition includes a wide range of delicately engraved examples in silver and bronze.

Continuing in the Goldenberg Galleria, the exhibition examines the opening of Iran to the West starting in the late-19th century, the reign of the Pahlavi Monarchy, and the exodus of much of the Jewish population following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Photographs by Hasan Sarbakhshian document the Jews remaining in Iran today, a community that numbers approximately 25,000. Installations by local artists Shelley Gazin and Jessica Shokrian reflect the large and dynamic diaspora community of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles.

“The Fowler is known for presenting exhibitions that effectively connect local communities with their distinctive heritages and then for sharing these rich and sometimes little-known cultures and histories with our visitors,” says Marla Berns, Shirley & Ralph Shapiro Director of the Fowler Museum. “In the case of *Light and Shadows*, it is significant that the Museum is situated in Westwood, in the heart of Los Angeles’s Westside, with its strong Iranian-American presence.”

This exhibition was created and organized by Beit Hatfutsot—The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv, Israel, where it was originally presented from Dec. 2010–May 2011. The curators are Orit Engelberg-Baram and Hagai Segev.



The lead sponsor for the exhibition is the Y & S Nazarian Family Foundation.



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The exhibition partner at the Fowler Museum is the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles.



Additional generous support comes from the Farhang Foundation, Milken Community High School, and Sinai Temple.

The English-language edition of the book *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews* (8.75 x 10.75 inches, 198 pages, 100 color and 19 b/w ills., hardcover, ISBN 978-0-9847550-2-8), will be published this fall and distributed by the University of Washington Press. The multi-authored volume is edited by David Yerushalmi, professor, Center of Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University, Israel.

Related Exhibitions in Los Angeles

A number of companion exhibitions and events at other local institutions have been planned in conjunction with *Light and Shadows*. A complete list is online at fowler.ucla.edu. The exhibitions are:

My Heart Is In the East, and I Am At the Ends of the West

Shulamit Gallery

Oct. 15, 2012–January 5, 2013

Works by contemporary artists Ben Mayeri, Laura Merage, Soraya Nazarian, Farid Safai, and Jessica Shokrian

What Remains: The Iranian Jewish Experience

Hillel at UCLA

Oct. 25–Dec. 14, 2012

Photographs of the Iranian Jewish experience in Los Angeles by Shelley Gazin, Jessica Shokrian, and others

Iranian Art Reimagined

The Jewish Federation Bell Family Gallery

Nov. 1, 2012–Mar. 31, 2013

Works by contemporary artists Jessica Shokrian, Mitra Forouzan, David Abir, Shamram Farshadfar, Tal Schochat and architect, Yassi Gabbay

"We are a reality": Iranian Jewish History in L.A.

UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library, East Exhibit Case

Nov. 2–Dec. 14, 2012

Books, journals, and historical materials from UCLA Library collections that reflect the presence of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles as well as in Iran

Leaving the Land of Roses

Shulamit Gallery

January 14–Mar. 9, 2013

Works by contemporary artists David Abir, Krista Nassi, Soraya Nazarian, Tal Shochat, and Marjan Vayhgan

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$11 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Beit Hatfutsot—The Museum of the Jewish People, situated on the campus of Tel Aviv University, tells the story of the Jewish people throughout the ages and around the world, using a remarkable

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combination of images, exhibits, models, music and a unique database. For more information on future exhibitions and events visit www.bh.org.il

Related Events at the Fowler:

Sunday, Oct. 21, 12–5 pm

Opening Day Community Celebration

1–4 pm

Hello! Shalom! Salam!

Family Art Activities

- Create a *tzedakah* box to collect spare change for causes you want to support
- Make a wish for your family as you emboss a silver *hamsa* charm, a sign for protection and good luck

2 pm

The Tapestry of Iranian Jewish Heritage: Reflections on Historical, Sociocultural and Political Relations

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture by Nahid Pirnazar

In this opening day program, Nahid Pirnazar, a lecturer in Iranian Studies at UCLA who teaches the history of Iranian Jews and Judeo-Persian literature, reflects on how Iranian Jews have influenced and been influenced by Iranian culture and identity. Additionally, Pirnazar discusses how, in more recent years, Iranian Jews have continued to balance their attachment to both their religious homeland, Israel, and cultural homeland, Iran, while adjusting to their new environments in the United States and elsewhere.

Sunday, Oct. 28, 2–4 pm

Tugging at Heart Strings: Experience the Classical Iranian *Tār*!

Family Jam

Discover the melodic beauty of Iranian classical music through Parviz Panah's virtuosic performance on the *tār*, the stringed Persian instrument that has been said to cure headaches, insomnia, and melancholy. Enjoy the exciting conversation between strings and percussion and then make your own instrument.

Thursday, Nov. 15, 12 pm

Saba Soomekh on Mashhadi Jews

Culture Fix

The Jews of Mashhad, Iran, were forced to convert to Islam, yet they secretly maintained their Jewish faith. Join professor Saba Soomekh, assistant director, Jewish Studies Program, Loyola Marymount University, at this thirty-minute talk inside *Light and Shadows: the Story of Iranian Jews* as she discusses this "crypto-Jewish" community and their diaspora in America.

Thursday, Nov. 29, 7:30 pm

Jewish Women's Theatre presents "Saffron and Rosewater"

Enjoy an evening of stories, song, and lovely surprises, transporting you to Iran and back to America and illuminating the struggles of Persian Jewish women. "Saffron and Rosewater" features dramatic readings from the insightful writings of Gina Nahai, Angella Nazarian, Farideh Goldin, Dora Levy Mossanen, and Esther Amini, many of whom will be in attendance for a talkback session. The program concludes with a hosted reception. This special presentation is free but reservations are required. Unclaimed reservations will be released fifteen minutes before the program start time.

Reservations: <http://www.ucla.hillel.org/saffronandrosewater>

"Saffron and Rosewater" is directed by Eve Brandstein; produced and adapted by Ronda Spinak; co-produced by Jessica Youseffi and presented in collaboration with The Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts at UCLA Hillel.

Sunday, Dec. 2, 1–4 pm

From Market to Table: A Persian Jewish Tasting Experience

Fowler on the Town

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Mother and daughter Manijeh and Saba Soomekh take participants through the bustling Elat Market to learn about special ingredients and recipes used to make Persian Jewish fare. Following the tour, guests will have a brief cooking demonstration followed by a kosher Persian food tasting. For adults and teens ages 13+. Transportation provided and attendance limited to forty guests. \$20 Fowler members; \$25 general. Registration: fowlerprograms@arts.ucla.edu

Presented in partnership with The Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts at UCLA Hillel.

Dec. 16, 1–4 pm

Gifts to Delight the Senses

Kids in the Courtyard

Cultures throughout the world give gifts that are infused with scented oils or contain spices and herbs. Create a gift of your own that charms the senses, inspired by artist Jessica Shokrian's installation in *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews*.

In early 2013 the Fowler will also present a scholarly conference, Purim celebration, and other related events.

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