

Fellow and librarian: a partnership of discovery

State Library Victoria hosts a fellowship program each year to support researchers and creatives to delve into the State Collection and reimagine it in new and interesting ways. Here we meet 2022 fellow Dr Sofi Basseghi and ask her about her project *The Road to Pairidaeza*.

A Persian-European-Australian multidisciplinary visual artist, creative researcher and sessional lecturer, Sofi combines documentary and narrative video art to morph stories of people's lived experiences with imagined narratives informed by Persian poetry, mythology and folklore. During her fellowship, Sofi worked closely with Dr Anna Welch, Senior Librarian, History of the Book and Arts. Anna is a historian, curator and librarian specialising in medieval and early modern manuscripts and printed books. She publishes her research in local and international journals and will soon be returning to London to resume the Harold Wright Scholarship in the Prints and Drawings collection at the British Museum. We asked Sofi and Anna to tell us about their experience of working together.

Sofi Basseghi

Q. What project are you working on during your fellowship?

The Road to Pairidaeza is an extension of a question which surfaced at the end of my PhD research about the genderless language of Persian. It focuses on the notion of *Pairidaeza*, an enclosed or walled garden imagined to resemble a

heavenly place on Earth. The English word Paradise is a transliteration of the Ancient Persian Avestan word Pairidaeza. My project delves into miniature paintings found within the Library's manuscripts collection to further understand Iranian culture, customs and mythologies as well as Persianate culture.

In addition, I have sought to understand the historical migration patterns of Iranian settlers in Australia before and after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, including my own journey in the late 1990s and the mass exodus of people of my own generation in the 21st century due to political, social and economic turmoil. The title of the project stems from dialogues with people of my own generation, many of whom are living in diaspora. I aim to present alternative representations of Iranians removed from the politics of Iran's recent histories and in which new migrants are in search of their own Pairidaeza.

Q. Which works or collections have you drawn on for your research?

I began this research journey spending many hours in the Heritage Collections Reading Room viewing the Library's Persian miniature manuscripts and rare books. Of particular interest were two 16th-century copies of Nizami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* (Quintet), one by Amir Khusrau Dihlavi and the other copied by the scribe Al-Abd Ibrahim of Astarabad and decorated with 15 miniature paintings in the Shiraz style. Furthermore, I studied the 19th-century *Tutinamah*, or *Tales of a parrot*, written in Persian and containing numerous illuminations, created in northern India. Another 19th-century book, entitled *Tales of a parrot*, printed a decade later in Calcutta [now Kolkata] and translated from Persian into English, presents a selection of amusing interpretations from the *Tutinamah* stories. I also discovered an intriguing limited edition book in the collection called *The Nizami ms. from the library of the Shah of Persia*. In addition, I have been searching for the word Pairidaeza, which has appeared in literature on the subjects of Zoroastrianism, ancient Persian and the Achaemenid empire, the history of Persian literature, the literature of pre-Islamic Iran and the concept of Paradise as garden, to name but a few.

Q. Has your collaboration with Library staff been useful?

I have been privileged to work with Anna Welch, whose support has been instrumental in the development of my project. She has introduced me to staff and librarians whose knowledge of where to locate material relevant to my enquiries proved invaluable.

I have learned a great deal about production methods and the different techniques and processes involved in making old Persian and medieval



Left Dr Anna Welch, Senior Librarian, History of the Book and Arts. Photograph by Abigail Varney **Right** Dr Sofi Basseghi, State Library Victoria Fellow 2022. Photograph by Abigail Varney

manuscripts. Anna has also shown me incredible 16th-century medieval Western manuscripts, such as the fascinating Pontifical commissioned by the bishop of Mirepoix. I was able to compare it with Persian manuscripts of the same period and draw parallels between the mythical explorations within the illuminations. It was also enlightening to learn about the use of pigments and gold in manuscripts, the types of papers used and how they survived being exposed to various climates as they travelled from their places of origin to Australia.

Not only did Anna share with me her knowledge and expertise on manuscripts, but she also introduced me to her colleague Des Cowley. Des generously informed me about artists' books and their various production methods, which has inspired my creative process.

Q. How is your project progressing?

The project is progressing well, and new possibilities unfold when fresh discoveries are made. My practice has been predominantly lens based, and I am excited at the prospect of creating artworks which incorporate elements

I have learned from techniques used in Persian manuscripts applied to a contemporary context. I had hoped to uncover stories from the first Iranians who migrated to Australia from Iran in the late 19th and 20th centuries and their reasons for doing so; however, I have found that such documentation isn't substantial, resulting in a shift of focus. One of my discoveries from researching the word *Pairidaeza* is a book on Zoroastrianism in the Library's collection which has ignited a new interest for me regarding its philosophy on happiness.

Q. Did you find anything surprising during your research?

Through my research I have encountered numerous surprises and highlights, one of which has been looking at the manuscripts through an enlarger in the Library's Conservation Lab. It was through this magnification that I discovered the exquisite attention to detail of the master miniaturists and the concept of the miniature really manifested itself. Details within the miniature paintings were revealed which were not visible to the naked eye. Anna Welch put me in touch with Dr Leila Alhagh, an expert in Islamic manuscripts, and from her and from the Library's senior conservators Katrina Ben and Bonnie Hearn I learned about unique techniques used for Persian miniature paintings. *Sanjag nishan* is a Farsi term which directly translates as 'needle impression'. An Iranian technique known by the same name, which was used in miniature paintings to accentuate the use of gold, was of particular interest to me. Tiny depressions were made using a blunt needle to 'punch' the gold. These marks would then catch the light and create a sense of movement and depth within the painting.

Anna Welch

Q. Have you enjoyed assisting Sofi with her fellowship research?

It's always a thrill to connect researchers, writers and artists with rare books that can inspire their work – it's one of the main reasons I wanted to work in our great State Collection when I finished my studies. Sofi is a highly respected artist and teacher: she has a rare combination of intellect, creativity and warmth. Her work explores the complex connections between people, objects and places, which is something that's always on my mind as one of the current custodians of a collection we will pass on to future generations. It's an honour and a genuine pleasure to support her work in the Library's collection – we've forged a friendship which I hope will lead to other collaborations in the future.

Q. Did you make any new discoveries for yourself while assisting Sofi?

I'm a historian of medieval European manuscripts, so together Sofi and I have really enjoyed exploring the congruences and differences between European and Persian book culture and production techniques. This has also involved some wonderfully enriching sessions in the Conservation Lab, through which I have learned so much. I've found out more about the Persian books in our collection, but also about the Persian diaspora in Australia and the resonance of these books in that wider cultural and social context.

Q. Why does the Library collect material like the Persian items?

For much of the Library's history, its collection has reflected the Anglo-Protestant culture that founded it in the middle of the 19th century. In recent decades, curatorial emphasis has been placed on building a rare books collection that better reflects both the global nature of the history of the book and the multicultural diversity of modern Victoria. The Library is for all Victorians, and the more diverse our collection is, the more it enriches our shared cultural life.

The Persian manuscripts were acquired in the build-up to the Library's 2012 exhibition *Love and devotion: from Persia and beyond*, which was a partnership with the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford. The exhibition was a fantastic example of what is achieved when the Library dedicates time, expertise and budget to projects that seek to celebrate Victorian cultural diversity. It was one of the first projects I worked on when I started at the Library in the Exhibitions team in 2011, and it's exciting to bring that knowledge to bear on Sofi's fantastic work a decade later.

Q. Is the fellowship a worthwhile opportunity for researchers?

The fellowship program was launched as part of the celebrations of 150 years since the Library's foundation in 1854, and I think it's the perfect testament to our mission to be 'a great emporium of learning', as the Library's founder, Redmond Barry, described it. The program generates significant new knowledge and artworks, but beyond those obvious outcomes it stimulates the creation of whole new networks of colleagues and friends, and that part is just as exciting and important, in my view. You never know what might come from it.