

Rekindling that Persian romance

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ANYONE who thinks Malaysian street protests can get a bit out of hand should look at Iran for all-out carnage. There is, however, another side to the artistic land formerly known as Persia, where romance was in the air long before the arrival of tear gas.

Iran can be considered the romantic heartland of Asia, though few are likely to see it that way these days. Its art is not like the height of lustful abandon that exists in the Himalayas, or the graphic peculiarities of Japan or China, or the near absence of romantic allusion in Southeast Asia.

Iran's contribution is not easy to find in Malaysia. Only one or two galleries display Iranian contemporary art. For older material, there is now a superb exhibition of the Aga Khan's collection at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia.

For a more comprehensive viewing, Australia is the unlikely location at the moment. Love And Devotion: From Persia And Beyond at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne provides a glimpse into the lyrical world of illuminated manuscripts.

Persian art is all about love, whether terrestrial or celestial. It existed well before Persia's Islamisation and it has continued into the 21st century, despite disapproval of the ruling religious elite. Along the way, Persian ideas of romance were adopted by the Mughal empire and the Ottomans.

Even Western culture fell under its sway, thanks mainly to the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, a work of extraordinary influence upon the 19th Century European imagination. It also reached the Malay peninsula in the more animal-friendly form of Tales Of A Parrot.

As this exhibition shows, the influence went back much further and helped to inspire writers such as Shakespeare and John Donne. The earliest and most enduringly important of the works on display is Firdausi's Shahnama (Book Of Kings). As with all the other of these small and delicate works, it has been shown in a way that is both contemporary and in keeping with the spirit of the times in which it was created.

The stolid and perhaps stuffy look of the State Library of Victoria belies an institution that works well with the source of the manuscripts. These are on loan from the Bodleian Library in Oxford. As the Melbourne library was inspired by the spirit of the Bodleian, there is a continuity between the two venues, made more relevant by the way in which Oxford's great library was itself formed following the model of Eastern scholarship that had been so admired in medieval Europe.

The term "cultural ambassadors" keeps turning up with these manuscripts, which is unsurprising when one considers that they are still the form of Islamic art best known to the majority of general art lovers. Carpets would have been a close contender in the past, but during the 20th Century it was the manuscript that kept its status as a truly artistic expression, rather than the more craft-like work of the weaver.

Apart from the visual appeal, this exhibition also brings out the more literary aspect. Being a library, like the Bodleian, the State Library of Victoria may consider it a duty, but it has become a great service to potential readers. It's easy to be distracted by the images and forget that the Shahnama, in particular, is a great achievement of a society that has always taken literature seriously.

Since modern Iran is a country that few understand — and very few ever visit (about one-tenth of the number of the tourists visiting a country as small as Malaysia) — this is a good opportunity to experience the enigma. It is the largest collection of Persian manuscripts ever to reach Australia, and it won't be any closer to Malaysia than that.

The State Library has tried hard to make these manuscripts comprehensible rather than keep them as mysterious as possible.

The temptation to make them seem beautiful but impenetrable has been resisted. Once again, it is probably a blessing that this exhibition was organised by two libraries rather than two art galleries.

A section on "How to read a manuscript" has useful numbering to guide the viewer through a leaf depicting the marriage of Yusuf and Zulaykha from a manuscript of Jami, AH 1004 (1595AD). The description is extensive and includes the following: "Beyond the garden wall is a lush landscape beneath a clear blue sky, representing the idea of 'eternal spring'. Two blossoming cypress trees on either side of the pavilion contribute to the painting's formal symmetry and symbolise Yusuf and Zulaykha's eternal love. Cypress trees were often planted beside graves as symbols of eternity in the Persian world, and were drawn by artists to represent 'beloved' characters in poetry."

Featured works include classic Persian love stories as told by writers such as Nizami and Jami, as well as Firdausi's Shahnama. In keeping with the current global interest in Sufism, also featured are works by the great poets of the genre such as Rumi and Hafiz.

Love And Devotion: From Persia And Beyond is on till July 1. Free entry.

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