Gold, Silver and Glass

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Power Networks, Cultural Identities, Technology Transfers and Agency across the Old World (7th Century BC - 1st Century AD)

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Introduction

St John Simpson

The story behind this volume of papers is closely connected with that of the 2023 British Museum exhibition *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece*: an understanding of how this was conceived, developed and received is crucial as the backdrop to the conference for which these are the proceedings. Those who work in museums – regardless of country – know and share the same issues, uncertainties, challenges and excitement, united by a love of collections and a desire to preserve and promote them as we develop improved forms of conservation, storage, documentation, research and public access. But those who do not work in museums often know little about what goes on behind the galleries or out of public hours. It is our duty to try and share this: to extend the work and collections of the museum beyond its walls as well as allow the public to view the working of the museum. In this introduction I can therefore share something of the making of an exhibition, a subject rarely explained by the curators concerned.[1] This gap has indeed been remarked on by ex-Trustee Sir Barry Cunliffe in connection with another exhibition-related publication:

> 'While this may be familiar ground for museum professionals, for the general reader, it introduces an intriguing new world, not least by explaining the creative decisions needed to make the exhibition the success that it was'.[2]

Luxury and power: Persia to Greece opened to the public at the British Museum on 4 May 2023. Curated by my former colleague Dr James Fraser,[3] with the assistance of successive project curators Henry Cosmo Bishop-Wright and Kelly Accetta Crowe, the exhibition was supported by the American Friends of the British Museum and BullionVault, with additional support from Julie Fitzgerald, Stephen Fitzgerald AO, Steven Larcombe and Sonya Leydecker.

Unlike most Museum exhibitions which focus on a culture, period or historical figure, this was a concept-driven show exploring concepts of luxury and how those enmeshed with expressions of power. Its inception began as a small commercial touring exhibition entitled *An age of luxury: the Assyrians to Alexander* which opened in the Hong Kong Museum of History on 9 May 2018, closing on 3 September that year, and then going on to tour three La Caixa Forum venues in Spain, namely Barcelona (5 April–11 August 2019), Madrid (19 September 2019–12 January 2020), and Zaragosa (20 February–25 October 2020).[4] This exhibition of mostly small items, supplemented by a few Assyrian reliefs, drew exclusively on the Museum's own collection. These were mostly from reserve, spanned a broad period from the 9th to 3rd centuries BC and the concept was loosely inspired by the works of Marion Feldman on earlier periods.[5] It was accompanied by a slim collection of heavily abridged essays.[6]

An unexpected projected gap in the Museum programme in 2022 led to the proposal by the Exhibitions department that this touring exhibition be shown in Bloomsbury. However, this drew a strong reaction from curatorial staff who agreed that it lacked sufficient intellectual credibility to stand serious scrutiny, and felt it needed a heavy re-focus with higher-quality star objects to justify a revised topic and title. This entailed removing more objects off display in the permanent galleries, particularly the Rahim Irvani Gallery for Ancient Iran (Figure 1). The lazy response to such requests is to regard them as a nuisance and leave showcases littered with apologetic removal slips. A more constructive reaction is to see this as an opportunity for rotation of the display while taking care not to compromise its messaging and aesthetic. We immediately chose the latter option by inserting alternative objects into the main Achaemenid case as a year-long intervention highlighting the reception of Iran in the West. For this purpose, the following items were selected from the reserve collection in the department: an 18th century print of

[1] I have tried to do the same for a previous exhibition of mine, *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World* (Simpson 2012); the formative and summative reports and press reviews for this and other exhibitions are available as open access files on my Academia pages.
[2] Cunliffe 2020.
[3] Jamie left at the end of September 2023 to take up the role as Dorot Director of the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem.
[4] The respective visitor figures for these were 220,536 (Hong Kong), 98,894 (Barcelona), 142,000 (Madrid) and 49,305 (Zaragosa). My thanks to Nadja Race, Head of International Engagement at the British Museum, for kindly supplying these.
[5] Casanova and Feldman 2014; Feldman 2006; 2015.
[6] Fletcher (ed.) 2018.

Figure 1. The Rahim Irvani Gallery for Ancient Iran, 2012

the north face of the Apadana at Persepolis,[7] an 1820s plaster cast of a disappeared sculpture from the same façade,[8] one of the first objects to be excavated at the site (a bronze bucket found by the Weld expedition in a corner tower of the Apadana in 1892),[9] and a display of vintage postcards showing the transformation of Persepolis from site to monument over the course of the 20th century. At the same time, small items from the Oxus Treasure display were removed for analysis in the Department of Scientific Research as part of a longer-term research project.[10] Moreover, sensitive conversations were had with Directorate and our Department of Greece and Rome over the inclusion in the exhibition of key objects from their collection, including selected sculptures exhibited in the Parthenon and Lycia galleries.

[7] The British Museum, inv. no. 2015,6007.4.

[8] The British Museum, inv. no. 1827,0501.14; cf. Simpson 2007: 159–60. These were the first casts to be struck from standing reliefs at a site in the Near East and represent an extraordinarily enlightened early attitude that contrasts with the norm of removing portable fragments. The process of moulding did not visibly affect these already partly weathered sculptures and to condemn the moulding as bad practice – as one modern scholar has done (Neumann 2024) – is more than a little harsh.

[9] The British Museum, inv. no. 1892,1214.1 / 91163; cf. Simpson 2007: 162–63.

[10] Building on an exploratory paper published by Mongiatti, Meeks and Simpson (2010), two more papers on the results have been published by Mongiatti (2017; 2018).

But charging entry to an exhibition relying mostly on objects otherwise on free display in the permanent galleries is something unconscionable and star loans were also needed. Building on long-term personal contacts and successful collaboration over a huge loan of Scythian and related antiquities from St. Petersburg for *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia* (2017/18)[11] and a reciprocal loan of Assyrian sculpture and other objects for their exhibition *'I founded therein my royal palace': Assyrian art from the British Museum* (2019/20),[12] a positive expression of interest was made for a loan from the State Hermitage Museum, accompanied by a second agreement in principle from the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow. Unfortunately, neither proved possible owing to the imposition of sanctions on Russia after the major escalation of its war with Ukraine on 24 February that year, and alternatives had to be found, and fast. Some key Achaemenid silverwares were identified for loan from the Musée du Louvre, a sister institution with whom we have long close relations. The second lending country was Armenia, where the National History Museum and Erebuni Museum in Yerevan both agreed to loan objects to the Museum for the first time, with the reciprocal loan agreed of a bronze head of Aphrodite (popularly called Anahita) found at Satala in eastern Turkey.[13] The last major lender was the National Museum of History in Sofia. This developed from a chance meeting at the Bulgarian Embassy in London on the occasion of an official handover of trafficked antiquities by the Metropolitan Police on 15 July 2021, whereupon the embassy learned of the possibility that the Museum could instead host future such events and that it was seeking possible loans for the forthcoming exhibition. Further talks were had in the Department and Embassy leading to the ambassador, His Excellency Marin Raykov visiting the Museum to meet our then director, Hartwig Fischer, when he expressed his willingness to facilitate a loan of the stunning Panagyurishte treasure held in the National Museum of History in Sofia. The occasion of this loan brought the Vice-President of Bulgaria, Ms Iliana Iotova, to open the exhibition on 3 May (Figure 2), with her speech reflecting on the role of cultural diplomacy in the past and the present:

> 'in the anxious world of today, when instead of building bridges we build walls, we need events like this exhibition. Because it is through culture and spirituality that people are brought closer together, and this is the only path that is not mined by hatred and division'.[14]

Figure 2. Opening speech of the exhibition by Ms Iliana Iotova, Vice-President of Bulgaria

[11] Simpson and Pankova (eds) 2017.
[12] Dandamaeva (ed.) 2019.
[13] The British Museum, inv. no. 1873,0820.1.
[14] Quoted by Fraser 2023*a*.

The Museum has a long-established process for developing special exhibitions, in the past considering these with a four-year lead time to allow sufficient research, loan negotiation, conservation, new photography and the catalogue to be delivered to press, before working intensively on the interpretation and design, writing panels, labels, web and/or audiovisual content, supporting the press and marketing campaign up to the opening, followed by an intensive round of lectures, gallery tours, further press and associated events. This lead time has been progressively reduced to as little as two years, with challenging clashes of priorities and pressure on delivery. This exhibition was no exception as the proposal was given to the curator with the opening date already fixed and the space designated as Room 35, a 400 sq m exhibition space within the Great Court, and the venue for many similar exhibitions, including *Queen of Sheba: Treasures of ancient Yemen* (2002), *Babylon* (2008), *Afghanistan: Crossroads of the ancient world* (2011), and *Inspired by the East: how the Islamic world influenced Western Art* (2019/20).

An early test of the exhibition concept was in March 2022 with a formative evaluation involving five 90-minute qualitative focus groups, the results presented the following month.[15] Recruitment ensured representation of individuals of Iranian and Greek heritage and Muslim belief, and the separate groups arranged according to non-members who had attended a previous Museum exhibition; others who had not but who had visited other exhibitions elsewhere; non-member exhibition-goers interested in the theme of Luxury; and British Museum Members (online and in-person). The participants were explained the exhibition theme and asked what visitors might expect from one called *Luxury*, how they felt about exhibitions at the Museum, and specifically Room 35 as a venue, what they knew about ancient Iran and Greece, where they thought luxury might fit into the interaction between those states, what their reactions were to the exhibition concept, narrative, content and interpretation; and, finally, to consider titles and marketing, and deliver recommendations to assist attracting an audience. The results indicated that the theme was popular, with an expectation that the content would be of beautiful valuable objects, but with concerns that it might be wordy and would therefore benefit from maps, audio, animation or experiential elements as part of the interpretation. Several wanted to see textiles and fabric, others wanted to see the antithesis of luxury shown in contrast to the elite treasures. One commented that 'I liked the propaganda element – the symbolism of how the Greeks depicted the Persians as half-human', and another remarked that

> 'We glorify the Greeks which sets us up to think that the Persians are full of decadence and corruption and then there is a plot twist as we see how it's impacted our view of luxury today'.

Others were wary of making analogies with the present, one arguing that 'the ties to the modern world seem tenuous' and another that 'I don't think this exhibition needs that comparison with the modern world. The rest was a really good story'. As is customary with these formative evaluations, the groups were shown a selection of exhibition titles to see which best met their expectation of a successful show: *Luxury in ancient Greece and Persia*; *Athens to Persepolis: the borders of luxury*; *Culture clash: luxury from Cyrus to Alexander*; *An age of Luxury*; *Luxury: power and politics*; and *Riches and ruin: visions of ancient luxury*. The responses were telling as many liked the evocative associations, sense of rivalry and the placing in historical context through references to countries, but an aversion expressed to what was compared with the title of an academic thesis: *Luxury in ancient Greece and Persia*. The final decision was made to subtly adapt it to *Luxury and power: Persia to Greece*.

The exhibition opened with an introduction panel and two facing portraits from antiquity intended to symbolise the meeting of the Achaemenid East with the Greek West: each was found in a sanctuary of Apollo on Cyprus, but one with Persian coiffure and the other in strongly Classical style (Figure 3).[16] The exhibition then flowed through three sections based on separate narratives. The first was *Fearing like kings: Luxury in Achaemenid Persia*, an examination of the role of luxury in the Persian court and its effect across the empire as Persian 'Court Style' rippled across provinces, and precious plate and forms of tableware were emulated in more affordable materials and local copies.[17] A rich purple backdrop set off some of the objects intended to display king and court, with Darius as Pharaoh, the royal hunt, tribute and tribute-bearers, inscribed vessels, and representation of women at the court (Figure 4). In a central case, silver tablewares were mounted at jaunty angles to symbolise a royal banquet (Figure 5), although with an inexplicable combination of a rhyton posed to pour into a lobed dish (rather than a drinking bowl). A massive silver rhyton found at Erebuni in Armenia, with a rider in Persian dress straddling the protome, was a star piece in this section. Further sections highlighted chariotry, weaponry, dress, jewellery, perfume, cosmetics, incense, dyes, lion/griffin imagery and the adoption of Persian 'Court Style' across the empire with trickle-down effects as lower-

[15] TWResearch 2023.

[16] The British Museum, inv. no. 1873,0320.8 (from Pyla, dated to *c.* 490/80 BC), 1958,0418.1 (from Tamassos, *c.* 460/50 BC, donated by Her Majesty's Treasury).

[17] Moorey 1985; Simpson 2005; Treister 2010; Khatchadourian 2016. A number of objects illustrated by Llewellyn-Jones (2023) were selected and newly photographed with this in mind.

Figure 3. The exhibition juxtaposes representations to symbolise the meeting between East and West

Figure 4. View of the opening section of the Achaemenid court display

cost equivalents were made for those who could not afford luxury materials yet who aspired to be part of this social system.

Passing through a dark narrow doorway with objects of violence and conflict to illustrate the Greco-Persian wars, the second section explored how Achaemenid-style luxury was adopted in Athenian society, one where ostentatious display could be seen as anti-democratic or pro-Persian: *Guilty pleasures: Luxury in Classical Athens*. An inscription

Figure 5. Achaemenid silverwares mounted for display

from the temple of Apollo at Delphi declared 'nothing in excess', yet exotic luxuries continued to be sought after. As Athens rose within the league of Greek cities allied against Persia, so did its wealth and revenues from its silver mines. Representational caricatures of Persians, Phrygians and Scythians feature on Attic pottery. Banqueting reappears as the *symposion* and red-figure Attic pottery animal-head drinking cups were displayed as if to imitate or mock the Achaemenid silverwares in the previous section (Figure 6). The displays also highlighted consumption of fish as a sign of elitism, peacocks as the epitome of luxury, the adoption of the Persian parasol by women rather than kings and the emulation of Achaemenid silverwares in black-gloss pottery.

A second dark passage dwelling on Alexander the Great's military conquest of the Persian empire offered a transition to the third and final section of the exhibition. This explored hybridisation of Greco-Persian culture as the Persian empire was carved up under Hellenistic kings: *Feasting like Persians: Luxury under Alexander the Great*. Alexander was a successor to the Persians but, to the horror of his troops, adopted certain Persian ways before he died aged only 32 on 11 June at Babylon, an astronomical diary written in cuneiform script noting that 'it was cloudy' that night.[18] He was commemorated on coins but his empire divided between Antigonids (Macedon), Seleucids (Middle East and Central Asia), Ptolemies (Egypt) and Attalids (western Anatolia). The Greeks brought new forms of thinking and urban planning, and Classical divinities were adopted in eastern lands: Aphrodite appears here at Byblos (Lebanon) and Satala (eastern Anatolia), which has been regarded there as representing Anahita. Dionysos appears on a gilded silver plate found in northern Afghanistan. Other sections returned to themes of dress, craft production, the significance of the Herakles knot as a symbol of healing and matrimony, the transformation of Persian traditions of jewellery with animal-head terminals into new styles, pottery emulating silver, the spice trade and the making of new forms of marbled, banded, *millefiori* ('thousand flower') and cane network glass (Figure 7). The highlight of this final section and dominating the centre of the display was the Panagyurishte treasure (Figure 8). This was a chance

[18] The British Museum, inv. no. 1881,0706.403.

Figure 6. Attic cups on display

Figure 7. Hellenistic network glass bowl (left) with a recreation (right) made by acclaimed Japanese glass artist Iwao Matsushima after many years research and replication efforts (left, British Museum, inv. no. 1896,0630.2; right, British Museum, inv. no. 2016,6026.1, presented by the artist)

find made in 1949 of 6.5 kg of Thracian gold dating to the 4th century BC and including animal-head rhyta, jugs, a *phiale* and amphora decorated with scenes from Greek mythology.[19]

Within these sections there were photographs of frankincense harvesting, removal of the dye gland from a murex shall, pouring molten silver, a marble quarry and alabaster workshop as illustrative support for small case displays of sought-after materials (frankincense, silver, marble, alabaster, ivory), plus four silent

[19] Megalla 2023; cf. Sofia 1969.

Figure 8. The Panagyurishte treasure

90-second videos. The latter showed the 'making of a royal costume' (explained through captions by Professor L. Llewellyn-Jones), 'making purple dye from murex' (demonstrated by Mohammed Ghassen Nouira, Carthage), 'making black glaze pottery' (shot at 'Attic Black', the Athens workshop of THETIS Authentics Ltd), and 'making a Hellenistic glass bowl' (demonstrated by the leading Japanese glass artist, Iwao Matsushima).[20] Other graphic content included maps, high-level quotes from historical sources and colour reconstructions of architecture at Persepolis, Athens, and the Greek theatre at Ai Khanum. There were also young learner labels designed to encourage a closer look at particular objects to search for animal designs, the dog on a Lycian banqueting scene from Xanthos, a joke cup, whistling a love-song, describing a bear personality and air-brushing a duck.

The exhibition ended with a single Roman glass rhyton said to be from Corfu, a re-imagined version and distant memory of an Achaemenid form also shown on a wall-painting at Pompeii (Figure 9). This choice of antiquity was intended to maintain the exhibition theme and replace a strong initial aspiration to exhibit images from the film *300* and a menu box from the Shah of Iran's *Celebration of 2500 Years of Iranian Monarchy* at Persepolis in 1971. It also responded to the views of many in the focus groups who concluded that they knew of these already, were frustrated with 'forced' examples of contemporary relevance, and actively disagreed with the closing line of the exhibition theme:

[20] This collaboration arose from an initial personal encounter at the 16e Congrès de l'Association Internationale pour l'Histoire du Verre held at Imperial College London in 2003, where a group of leading Japanese glass artists participated through the inspirational input of Ryuji Shikaku, curator at the Okayama Orient Museum and specialist of Sasanian glass. The conversations which occurred then, and thereafter in Okayama, resulted in Tami Ishida replicating and presenting an identical copy of a late Sasanian cut glass bowl to the British Museum (British Museum, inv. no. 2007,6004.1; cf. British Museum, inv. no. 1964,0415.1 / 134373) and publishing her ground-breaking research results (Ishida 2022), Iwao Matsushima making and presenting a replication of a Hellenistic 'network' mosaic glass bowl in the British Museum (British Museum, inv. no. 2016,6026.1; cf. British Museum, inv. no. 1896,0630.2), and ongoing replication research by Hidetoshi Namiki on gold-leaf glass (this volume). Their collaborative work and research have extended to other ancient glass in the British Museum – exemplified in the catalogue of the special exhibition of glass entitled *Ancient Glass: Feast of Color*, held first at the MIHO Museum near Kyoto (9 March–9 June 2013) and then at the Okayama Orient Museum (3 July–7 September 2013) – and continuing with scientific research on Sasanian glass as part of a separate research project.

Figure 9. Getting a closer view of the Roman rhyton (British Museum, inv. no. 1868,0110.510)

> 'Luxury was embraced by the rulers of ancient Persia to signal power and prestige, yet it was rejected by the newly democratic city of Athens as eastern, decadent and corrupt; these competing historical perspectives shape our uneasy relationship with luxury today'.

The exhibition ended on 13 August with a total of 77,999 visits over 102 days. The summative evaluation drawn up in September that year gives an interesting insight into how the exhibition performed.[21] It is based on a sample size of 2,616 responses to an online survey sent to exhibition viewers after their visit over the full exhibition period of 4 May–13 August, and the data weighted using the Museum's exhibition ticketing data. Visits were relatively consistent during the first 12 weeks with a daily average of 498, followed by a sharp peak in the final weeks, coinciding with the school holidays, as weekly visits peaked at 6.8k from 3–9 August and the highest daily attendance recorded on Friday 4 August at 1,240 visits (775 paid and 465 Member visits). 52% of visits were intellectually motivated, with as much as 78% citing the desire 'to improve my own knowledge and understanding' (this being given as the main outcome on 33% of visits), with a propensity to select this statement increasing with age. The next most-cited motivations were 'to gain a deeper insight into the subject' (67%) and 'to experience awe-inspiring, fascinating or beautiful things or places' (57%). A minority felt the experience could have been made richer for those with an academic interest. Members made up over a third of visits (35%), meaning that it attracted an older and less diverse audience than some other exhibitions (68% were aged 55 or older), but underlining how the subject matter appeals to one of the Museum's core audiences and encourages them to renew their membership and encourage others to join. However, 7% were by families (mostly first-time visitors) and these were particularly positive on the use of videos, commodities such as frankincense and the accessible size of the space. The videos on the Museum Youtube website were very popular and cited as stimulating visits and exhibition enjoyment, attracting a total of 271,046 views with a total of seven videos, although some attracted much higher numbers than others:

- *Curator's introduction to Luxury and power: Persia to Greece* (17,628 views)

[21] Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2023.

- *Crafting Persian luxuries* (3,908), *The Parthenon: art and empire* (2,380)
- *Why Peacocking in Ancient Athens might get you ostracised (ostrich-sized?)* (33,650)
- *The Gold of Thrace: the Panagyurishte Treasure* (Dr B. Petrunova: 3,746)
- *How the Greco-Persian Wars changed the way Athenians drank their wine* (208,654)
- *Persia and Greece, Objects in Focus: Oxus Treasure figures* (Dr L. Llewellyn-Jones: 1,080).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the visitor demographic, 28% of interviewed visitors cited awareness of the exhibition through Museum emails, followed by the website (25%) and the Members' magazine (14%), but with much less awareness of transport poster marketing or social media. 39% of visitors were from London, 51% from the rest of the UK and only 11% from overseas (although this reflects the fact that international tourism had not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels at that stage). Dwell time in the exhibition was as high as 84 minutes, exceeding the Room 35 target average by 34 minutes, but contributing to some comments on the crowding negatively impacting on their experience. Finally, just over half rated the exhibition 'excellent', with 56% 'very satisfied' on the tone of information, themes and narrative, and 51% on the amount of information, and a similar proportion said they would certainly recommend it to friends and family. Critically, 90% strongly agreed/agreed that the exhibition helped them better understand the concepts of luxury in and inter-relationship between the Achaemenid, Classical Greek and Hellenistic worlds, and a strong endorsement of the concept advanced by its curator. However, there were also many criticisms of the Museum's choice to only publish a hardback book (priced at £35), and forego the opportunity to produce a slim affordable guide or online version as it had for many previous exhibitions.

The design of the exhibition by Aaron Jones elicited even stronger responses. Some visitors liked the 'simple yet effective' use of 'line drawings in monumental scale providing the ambience of what it may have been like to be at the Achaemenid court', but another was more ambivalent in their remark that 'ambience is always important to create that sense of awe in relation to the deep past – the BM does it very well, though perhaps not quite as well in this exhibition as some others (e.g. Stonehenge)'. The summative valuation also cited the dark narrow partitions intended to connect the main exhibition sections as causing bottlenecks. Some of the leading press reviews were even more frank as they criticised a design which left objects floating in glass cases against white backgrounds, with drapery evoking tents awkwardly juxtaposed with outlines of columns representing courtly Persian or Greek religious architecture (Figure 10). One remarked on how 'the gallery has been swathed with white draperies and faux columns like a tackily overdone Greek restaurant, or maybe a shop selling repro antiques'.[22] The reviewer also picked up on the connecting displays: 'a Hoplite helmet, sounds of clashing weapons, that's your lot', before questioning the spelling of Herodotus' name and a perceived marginalisation of his grasp of world culture.[23] *The Sunday Times* went further by praising the contents and the videos, hoping to 'dream covetous dreams about the pair of gold, carnelian, emerald and pearl earrings with pendants in the shape of amphorae. Luxury – it's powerful stuff', but panned the design:

> 'This haul of utterly beautiful booty from the two empires is presented against the naffest of exhibition set-dressings: gauze swags, glittering curtains, purple cabinet liners – pure *Carry On Artaxerxes*. The British Museum's Stonehenge show last year was a masterclass in presentation. Flints and collars seemed suspended in space. Here, some of the cabinets might be windows on Hatton Garden. The backing track is little better. Sounds of battle clang on repeat. Not only is it intrusive, but it undermines the message that luxury was a form of power subtler and more persuasive than the usual brawny clashing at the borders of empire'.[24]

A third review in *Time Out* summed up the exhibition thus: 'there are plenty of gorgeous objects here, though I can't figure out why they've draped the whole place in silk sheets, making it all look like an Essex swingers' party'.[25] The addition of modern recreations of Persian riding costume and court dress – so-called 'Median' and 'Persian' dress – in dyed lambs' wool was innovative in a British Museum exhibition (Figures 11–14). These props were made by a costume-maker, Rebecca Southall, under the guidance of Dr Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, and the costs met by a grant from the British Institute of Persian Studies and the exhibition budget.[26] However, they also attracted polarised views as some liked the colours whereas others criticised the choice of materials and condemned them as kitsch. But everyone was overwhelmed by the impact of the Panagyurishte treasure: 'if it glisters, it's almost

[22] Jones 2023.
[23] Jones 2023.
[24] Freeman 2023.
[25] Frankel 2023.
[26] Llewellyn-Jones 2023*a*. The props were returned to the British Institute of Persian Studies after the exhibition closed.

Figure 10. The exhibition design divides public opinion

Figure 11. Modelling a reconstruction of the Iranian 'riding costume'

Figure 12. Modelling a reconstruction of the Iranian court robe

certainly gold',[27] 'the drinking horns steal the show',[28] revelling in its 'aesthetic free-for-all',[29] and adding that this is 'drunk history in which stiff classicism melts into "oriental" splendour. At last, we get a draught of intoxicating exuberance' (Figure 15).[30] Another reviewer concluded that this 'is the type of exhibition the British Museum does very well and this one's another hit'.[31]

[27] Freeman 2023.
[28] McDonagh 2023.
[29] Jones 2023.
[30] Jones 2023.
[31] Khan 2023.

Figure 13. Installing the ‘court robe’ recreation of dyed lamb’s wool and gold-sprayed resin appliqués

Figure 14. Inspecting the Iranian ‘riding costume’ display prop

The underlying message is clear and lessons easily learnt: design must enhance rather than distract the core message, and a clear synergy sought between objects with stories to tell, accessible interpretation and beautiful design. Long experience shows that rich contextual imagery of scenery and sites has repeatedly gone down well with Museum visitors, whether the general public, media or specialists. There is often a place for digital intervention but silence is golden, whether in a special exhibition or permanent gallery, and delivery has to be appropriate to the Museum venue: tacky noise effects or voice-overs add nothing and detract from visitor appreciation and understanding of content.

Within the Museum, exhibitions are set within a wider public programme and early discussions enabled us to organise this conference to open with the 27th Vladimir G. Lukonin Memorial Lecture, followed by a day for British

Figure 15. The climax of the exhibition receives careful scrutiny

Figure 16. Some of the speakers and attendees at the conference in June 2023

Museum members and a second full day open to all members of the public who booked, therefore running over 16–18 June 2023 (Figure 16).[32] These papers form the basis of this volume, the scope of which develops and broadens the geographical remit of the exhibition while retaining its temporal range. They are divided into two parts – the first dealing with cultural interaction, the second focused on technological connections – and ending with general conclusions.

[32] These three days were followed by an invitation-only behind-the-scenes workshop for the speakers to discuss ongoing research on the Oxus Treasure in more detail as selected pieces were brought out for closer inspection and examination in the Department of Scientific Research and which will inform a future publication.

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I would now like to extend my thanks to the contributors to this volume for agreeing to participate and deliver their papers, and their patience while this volume was assembled, copy-edited and peer-reviewed. Logistic challenges prevented some of the invitees from participating, but I am delighted that we could include three in these proceedings and thus maintain an even and politically impartial geographic coverage for the regions under consideration. Here I must also thank those anonymous peer reviewers – chosen for their specialist knowledge – for their timely turn-around of reports and comments. I am also grateful to Kate Morton for graphic support, and all those institutions and individuals who supplied supporting images and who are individually acknowledged in the relevant papers.

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Part 1:
Cultural Meanings

The first part of this volume consists of seven papers which examine definitions of culture from Europe and the Near East to the Caucasus and Eurasia, challenging perceptions, questioning the agencies of change and creating new avenues of research.