



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 3 IRANZAMIN

Transcript of interview:

PROF. PEDRAM KHOSRONEJAD

Curator

LISA HAVILAH

Chief Executive – Powerhouse Museum

PREDRAM KHOSRONEJAD

Tim Stackpool:

I first asked the professor at the exhibition, given the unique nature and focus of his curation, how was it that the Powerhouse Museum came to acquire such an extensive collection?

Pedram Khosronejad:

You're the only one ask me, it's a sharp question, thank you. You know, the history of today's Powerhouse dates back to City International Exhibition in 1850s. And there, we had participation of botanic garden and different other institution who received already collections in which you could find Persian arts. The provenance is always very interesting for museums. And, as far as I can say, majority of objects that we can see here back to Qajar dynasty, belongs to non Iranians who lived in Persia, in cities like Isfahan, Shiraz, Tehran. They were there for businesses, and then we know that as soon as they understood something was wrong, many of them left Iran with their objects of Persia. Wherever they went, they went back to Europe, England, Russia. Then, for another reasons, different reasons, they ended up to Australia since let's say, and brought the objects with themselves. When they were departed, their children, donated, dedicated those objects to the museum, and those collection little by little, came to each other.

Pedram Khosronejad:

This is why majority of objects, they have these stories. We didn't purchase any objects, and this is the beautiful thing. So me as anthropologist, I'm trying to trace the story of objects. I found amazing stories that I told some of them introduction. But just as example, we have two watercolour designers carpet here from Paul Rutzer. I said, "Paul Rutzer is very strange German name." Paul Rutzer was born in Russia around 1900 by German parents, who immigrated already to Russia. By the Revolution, he moved to Iran and settled down in Kerman, in centre of Persia. And he built up, can you imagine, a business of Persian rugs and he became rug weaver. Again, war will happen, moves with his wife to London. In 1941, immigrated to Australia. He claimed in arrival, "I have 10,000 pounds cash and more than 50 Persian rugs." He was also friend of Jacques Cadry. Jacques Cadry is a main figure in this story, not the exhibition, but the story to bring lovers of Persian crafts together, especially those love carpets.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Florence Broadhurst also was one of them. Jacques Cadry helped Florence Broadhurst deal with this lovely Persian motif wallpapers and exhibition. Jacques Cadry himself is an immigrant, first Jewish Persian immigrant of Australia. So yes, majority of our collection, these 120 objects, they came in the way of immigration if you want. And this is how make me comfortable. Powerhouse Museum, which has the lovely idea of Paramatta Powerhouse 2024. Moving to Paramatta, among immigrants, of North Western Sydney. And one of the main aim is how art objects can talk with their community, that they never seen. How I can educate them again to the objects that we have. This is what you didn't see, not even your parents did see. So this is the role of the curator and museum of applied art and science.

Tim Stackpool:

That's great insights and education. And always lovely to hear that the objects were not plundered that were either gifted donated or acquired-

Pedram Khosronejad:

Isn't it beautiful?

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, that's exactly. Now there's a limited number of items here in your exhibition, but there's almost 2000 Persian objects held by the museum. How did you choose which ones to include here?

Pedram Khosronejad:

For the last 20 years, I educated, work in different countries. Moving to France, I have two degrees in paintings. I was professional painter and professor of art and historian of Islamic art. I moved to France to do my PhD in social and cultural anthropology because of that, I work a little bit in Louvre Museum. Then they invited me to teach University of Oxford in UK for three years. I was lucky to work in Ashmolean Museum and Petersburg Museum. Then I work in the 80s in Saint Andrews. Then I move for a year to Japan, as a visiting professor in National Museum of Ethnography of Japan in Minpaku, Osaka. So, and after that in Brazil. A year, I was in Museum Ethnographies of Rio. And last three years United States, where I did and create many exhibition. So I have a type of academic that I'm creator and social anthropologist professor too. As I'm here in Australia, adjunct professor in Western Sydney University in Liverpool.

Pedram Khosronejad:

When you work as anthropologists, who constantly work on material culture. Immediately you understand, I'm a specialist of religion, I'm a specialist of war, I'm a specialist of crafts and production. So immediately, I understood why we have around 2000 objects, prehistory objects is long journey. If we want to have exhibition, how I can focus again with the aim of our leader, Lisa Havilah, Parramatta Powerhouse 2024 community engagement. Knowing the fact that we are museum of applied art and science, not art gallery. We are not British museum. And then immediately, I understood community engagement goes through objects. This is what I am teaching for last 10 years, how my community or communities can see the object and understand this is from their culture. And also I ask object, talk to me and little by little, I understood, okay, I want to have this concept, this concept. From 300 to 200, 200 to 120 and the provenances stories of objects. So in the end, I came to 120,

Pedram Khosronejad:

Which perfectly create my aim of cultural anthropologist, purification and cleansing, joyfulness and happiness. The themes that embedded in culture today. Persian, Iranian immigrants suffering for lack of that, because they're far from Iran, they are here probably they cannot return to Iran. But their objects and their culture is here, and I can bring them here. This is your culture you're missing. This is how I reduced the number and arrived to this what we have today here.

Tim Stackpool:

Is this more than a story of immigration? Is there a greater message in here, or have you just taken a slice of Persian immigration to Australia and hope to communicate that?

Pedram Khosronejad:

It's just part of the slice. Because for running this exhibition, that exhibition is for five months. And I introduced the exhibition to my community of Northern Sydney Iranians. What do you think? How we can do? And this is engagement, it's not immigration. They are immigrants, but they're Australians. So no, but embedded as an indirect message, what immigrants can learn from this exhibition and what this exhibition can teach other immigrants, which are not Iranians.

Tim Stackpool:

These are great practical objects here, but of course, combined with artistic merit.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes, definitely.

Tim Stackpool:

Does the region still you think generate this sort of creative talent?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Oh, definitely. Persian culture is really (how I can put it in the words?), Perfectionist culture. Everything should be perfect. So in art and crafts, also Persian arts and craftsman, very perfectionist. Maybe for one sword, it took one year to make it. But this is why Persian sword makers of Isfahan were very famous in 10th century, in Alhambra Spain. Or Persian tiles or carpets, of 15th century carpets of Safavid Isfahan. Silk carpets very famous in Japan. Emperor of Japan use to dress his personal samurai bodyguards from silk carpets of Isfahan. Nice example, know your perfectionist and be very intact is part of Persian art which is still continued

Tim Stackpool:

Very far reaching. One of the objects that I found quite interesting that I think stood apart from some of the others was that you've included bank notes and currency. Why is that?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Historically Iran, had been divided between different dynasties in Iran. From 15th century, Safavid then Qajar and Pahlavi. Somehow in the exhibition, I also wanted to show to everyone including Iranian what was your history? Don't forget about that Qajar period. When Pahlavi came to the history of Persia, Reza Shah, he destroyed, literally and physically. The history of Qajar. Especially arts and crafts, architectures, palaces, wiped out and expend money to craft his own history is obvious everywhere. But Iranians, including let's say my parents, don't know about Qajar period. And that King Nasir al-Din Shah is the big patron of art and architecture, father of photography of Iran. The first photographer of Persia, the only

King photographer in the world. Travelled three times to Europe, rumour is lover of Queen Victoria. And I was really amazed to find his bank notes and coins, beautiful plates that he ordered made in China, in content in China.

Pedram Khosronejad:

His name is calligraphied in Farsi on it. So I said, this is very good moment to tell to our visitors "look, not only he was a big" ... because what's the name of that theme, patronage and crafts. He is there as a patron of the art, but also the praiser use and the craft itself. So this is why we see bank notes. But historically, when you moved to Pahlavi also is, Oh, we have notes of Reza Shah and Shah. This is where we stopped 1978 and the plate of queen of Persia. Historically, I think I was interested to show them also, even they were against Qajar, but they were a good patron of art. Plate of queen made in Germany.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So yes, there are some historical education embedded there. And why not with bank notes, crafts, and objects that used by people. They are not new bank notes. They are used really see them. And I think it's beautiful that beside ceramic, besides silk, I have bank notes too. What I would like to add, if you permit, I wanted a sensory exhibition. This is why in front of some of the sets, you hear the anthem, when you're in flag. When you are in front of Sufi objects, you see the rumour of praying and rituals of gathering Sufi of Kurdistan of Persia. Or when you are in front of performance and rituals, you have the Muharram rituals in the praise of Imam Husayn, the Prince of Martyrs. That our visitors feel these objects are not museum objects, they had life. This is how one curator, who is anthropologist in museum of applied art, set this for you. Is not our gallery, objects were used. So listen, how and where they were.

Tim Stackpool:

The audio as you pass by the displays is all terribly relevant to the objects. You mentioned also a specialty of yours being religion. Do these objects tell us about the spirituality of the time? Is there any reflection for instance, with Islam in these objects?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Well, we have two sets that are connected to the religion and devotion. The first one is in Sufism in Iran that I added some of the really devoted objects. Sufism is Islam, but not all Islam is Sufism. But it's Iranian version of Sufism, which is attached, inspired by Shiism. Imam Ali as their leader, and then the Sufi masters. We have a Sufi master head, that beautiful comb is something between health, art, and devotion. How we use the comb? Comb is for cleansing hair, beard in case of Sufi. But if you see around this comb, they engraved the name of prophet Muhammad and 12 saints of Shiite world. When you touch it... When touch your body, you give sacredness and purification to your soul too... Yes, definitely you have ...

Pedram Khosronejad:

..we have mostly notion of Sufism and religion and devotion rituals. But different is Shia Islam is in the next one where we have performances purely Shiism. Imam Husayn is Prince of Martyrs that they praise

him. And every year during month of Muharram, all Shia, but specifically Iranians, lament in the street, publicly, and those arms and armour that we see and that beautiful Shiite banner use is still in the public to praise his memory.

Tim Stackpool:

On that theme as well, the display cases, custom designed, very much reflect, I guess, the architecture you would expect to see in the period. But they're very strong, very stone-like almost like altars in a way.

Pedram Khosronejad:

The idea when I decided to do that an Iranzamin, an Iran theme, I had several meetings with our design team. And my idea was how far we can go to give life to the real objects, to feel they are in their own home or place or palace court whatsoever. So I collected many images of palaces of Iran, especially Golestan Palace, which is today museum, the biggest museum complex in Tehran. These arcs that you can see here, it goes very well that Islamic architecture is, especially Qajar. So I made many images for comparison for our design team, but the colour and texture that you see here, it's like marble is like interior of Golestan palace marbles. And it's lovely and arcs that we repeatedly use here, give it feeling that how in Iranian architecture, in also domestic home or court or palace, we keep them safe in this shape. Yes, you're right by aim also, we wanted to go the gaze of our visitors, that this is somehow the texture and colour, even shadows, even the playing with shadows, is what is important here. How we kept them in Persian houses and architecture. You're right.

Tim Stackpool:

And finally, Pedram, what would you hope that the average visitors of Powerhouse would leave with when they come through and see your exhibition? What's the message you'd like them to go home with?

Pedram Khosronejad:

Unity. Unity is important fact for me again, now as a human. Let's forget about curator or anthropologists. That the title Iranzamin, one day was the land of Persians that today doesn't exist anymore. Is Iran with that political borders, which is not right. Afghans, Azerbaijani, Tajik, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Turkey, we were big land of Iranians. Today, when you talk about Hojan, Tashkan, Quoras, they are names that embedded in our soul as Iranians. I hope our friends, my hamzaban in Persian, our language is the same. If our nationality is the same. All of ours, Persian speakers of the world that living in Australia, Tajik, Afghans, Uzbeks, Girkis, Uyghurs come and feel this is home. This is why I choose "Iranzamin" to include everyone, every one of you, every one of your family members and bring children and also Australians know unity was part of our culture.

LISA HAVILAH

Tim Stackpool:

I first asked Lisa, how such a niche and perhaps previously unseen collection of Persian artifacts finally came to light in 2021.

Lisa Havilah:

The way that Iranzamin started was, we're undertaking a very big digitization collection project where we're assessing and digitizing 338,000 objects from our collection. And so, we have a huge team of over a hundred people working on that project. And so, what we were looking for was to look at very particular aspects of the collection and Pedram has been working with us for a year. I started to work on looking at particularly the Persian Iranian collections. And through that work, we really realized the extent of that collection. And he developed the show and I think it was really the opportunity to bring out those objects and those stories that had never been seen before. And I think that's not the only thing that's come out of Pedram's work. Not only do we have the exhibition, but all of these objects and their interpretation will be online anytime. So, we're really excited about that.

Tim Stackpool:

Does it surprise you even though the extent that you have been working with the Powerhouse now? Does it surprise you at the extensive nature of the collection?

Lisa Havilah:

It constantly surprises me. It constantly surprises me and it's so rich and has such depth. And I think endless opportunity to tell stories, but connect communities where their history is. And I think that's one of the things that's very special about Iranzamin is the work that Pedram is doing with communities right across Sydney and Western Sydney to really interpret those objects, but connect those Sydney, New South Wales, Australian communities with Iranian Persian cultures.

Tim Stackpool:

Beyond this exhibition, as I said, you have an enormous timetable to have all coming up.

Lisa Havilah:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

Can you tell us a little bit about what you're excited about over 2021?

Lisa Havilah:

Yeah. So, one of the biggest projects this year is a project called Eucalyptusdom, which is kingdom of the eucalyptus. And our museum has a very long history with the eucalypt because we were there 50, 60 years ago, working on the development of the eucalyptus oil industry. And so, we were very, very much part of that. And we had a very big focus on economic botany, which is an interesting part of the museum and a story that hasn't been told really. And so this exhibition will tell that story, but it's brought together a whole range of creative people, artists, historians to really look at the eucalypt from a whole range of different perspectives. And the eucalyptus is so much part of our national identity. And there's over 800 eucalyptus species, 842, I think. And so many of them are under threat. So it not only tells a history, but it also really looks to a very contemporary issue as well.

Tim Stackpool:

There are so many facets of that, just listening to you talk about it. The eucalypt is included in so much of our early painted artwork and even through to more contemporary works on screen for instance. I mean, Sonny Hammond was using a eucalypt leaf to call Skippy in the Bush Kangaroo series. I mean, it really is endemic into our culture.

Lisa Havilah:

Yes, yes, you're so right. Everywhere you look the eucalyptus is Snuggle Pot and Cuddle Pie, fashion, design, decorative arts, it really reaches right across who we are as the country. And I think constantly connects back to who we are as a museum, because not only were we leading in terms of eucalyptus oil development, but we also used to be a teaching institution. So we have thousands of wood samples that are samples of how, in terms of the building industry, used Australian wood in a whole range of different ways. And so, it really is quite incredible. The more you sort of delve into the eucalyptus, the deeper it gets.

Tim Stackpool:

And when will we see this exhibition?

Lisa Havilah:

It opens in July. So, it's being developed right now. So, there's a lot of people working on it. And so we're really excited to be able to unveil it later in the year.

Tim Stackpool:

Last time we spoke, we were pretty much in the midst of COVID. Was that an opportunity for you to perhaps take a breath and now hit the accelerator again? Or was it just so frantic trying to manage throughout that time?

Lisa Havilah:

Well, it was a really challenging time and we were very focused on retaining our staff and ensuring all of our staff had meaningful work through that period. And so, we really went back to our collections and our digitization project. And after July, we really started building on our program for this year. So it was

a moment to reflect, but we are in a period at the moment of constant reflection, because what is really important in terms of the overall renewal of the Powerhouse is that we're looking back to move forward and making sure that we're bringing forward the incredible legacy and hundreds of years of work. Bringing that forward as we build our new museum in Parramatta, as we were near the Powerhouse, as we expand in Castle Hill, that's critically important for it to have meaning and continuity. But also enable us to continue to enrich the ways that we tell stories and enrich the ways that we share the collection.

Tim Stackpool:

What's your philosophy in terms of outreach beyond Sydney, beyond New South Wales into the rest of the country, is there one?

Lisa Havilah:

We, the Powerhouse, is absolutely an Australian institution and more and more and an international institution and some of the exhibitions that we're doing this year. So, we have a partnership with the National Museum of Korea for a project called Five Hundred Arhats, which celebrates the 60th anniversary of friendship between Korea and Australia. So, we are trying to work on this sort of very localized, but also giving that localized level of work and storytelling in terms of Sydney and New South Wales, a national and international context. So, very important that our partnerships reach out across Australia, but also around the world.