

Warlord or architect of a new civilization?

Exploring reactions to Shah 'Abbas

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Barbaric warlord or architect of a new civilization?

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Shah 'Abbas is a **controversial** but for the most part **unfamiliar** subject matter for an exhibition.

For those who know of Shah 'Abbas, their **opinions are likely to differ**, for those who don't, the British Museum is going to have to work hard to attract them and **communicate** the proposition of a Shah 'Abbas exhibition.

The public see an exhibition of Shah 'Abbas as an opportunity to have a **multi-sensory experience** that will transport them back in time to historical Persia.

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1 The Brief

The British Museum wanted to explore expectations and responses to a future exhibition on Shah 'Abbas, the third in a series of four focusing on great leaders. The exhibition is due to open in February 2009 and is aimed primarily at the core British Museum audience, adult non-specialists, alongside target audiences including those interested in Iran, British Muslims, religious studies students, academics and experts.

Specifically the research aimed to explore how visitors may react to different aspects of the exhibition in order to establish whether any changes should be made to make it more appealing and stimulating to the target audience.

1.1 Our Approach

In order to address this brief we recruited six different groups to participate in a forum. The groups included Iranian, Muslim and 'Other' visitors some of which were new to the British Museum and others who had been to exhibitions at the Museum previously.

	Iranian	Muslim	Neither	Total
Regular BM exhibition attenders	3	3	6	12
First time BM attenders	3	3	12	24
	6	6	12	24

The session lasted 2.5-hours and was observed by members of the British Museum interpretation and marketing staff. The session was taped and the transcription is appended.

The format of a forum was felt to be the most suitable as it enabled different groups to present their reactions to the exhibition before each other, subsequently allowing for a colourful and insightful discussion.

1.2 Forum Context

For those who knew who he was, Shah 'Abbas proved a controversial character and clear, polarised views emerged during the forum discussion – particularly amongst the Iranian attenders - that then notably impacted on reactions to the proposed poster and exhibition. The image held by the religious Iranians of Shah 'Abbas as a great ruler and inventor of a religion

in an exciting era of Iran's history was juxtaposed by the image of him as a bloody, ruthless dictator held by Iranians with a more secular perspective. Holders of either view were not satisfied that their perception of Shah 'Abbas came across in the proposed poster and exhibition.

Roughly half of the forum group were not familiar with Shah 'Abbas - this included mainly those attenders from the 'Other' groups but also some Muslim and Iranian attenders.

2 First Impressions – the exhibition poster

2.1 Reactions to the title

With nothing by way of an introduction we asked participants for their top of mind responses to the exhibition title.

Immediately it became apparent that approximately half of the forum attenders did not know who Shah 'Abbas was and because of this there was a fairly negative reaction to the suggested exhibition title. Several attenders felt that the title 'Shah 'Abbas and the Remaking of Iran' was alienating and not descriptive enough. Those who were not familiar with Shah 'Abbas barely seemed to notice the sub title, being immediately off put by the unfamiliarity of the main title.

'I don't think that the average person would know about Shah 'Abbas ... I don't think that's going to be appealing to the average person' Forum attender

Some people felt that if the word 'Persia' had been included in the title that this would be more appealing, and may avoid any current political connotations:

'Persian History would have got my attention' Forum attender

'I think the word Iran and Persia, although they essentially are the same place, Persia is a lot more appealing than perhaps Iran, I mean in the current climate, that has a negative impact, that connotation of Iran in the images that come to your mind' Forum attender

'Title - change to words regarding Persian history' Iranian non-visitor post it

Others felt that the title needed to be more intriguing and put forward their own suggestions. They felt that the title needed to entice potential visitors, particularly those who were unfamiliar with Shah 'Abbas, to want to find out more.

'It hasn't got name recognition ... the Iranian King Warrior, or something like that would make people look a bit more' Forum attender

3 Expectations of the exhibition

3.1 Fears

Forum attendees were asked, on the basis of the poster as the sole communicator of the proposition, what they feared the exhibition experience might be.

Information

Visitors hold a variety of fears over the level of information contained in the exhibition. Some fear that there would not be enough information presented:

'Just a couple of pictures' Other non-visitor post-it

'A shortage of information. A single paragraph on each artefact or painting is never enough' Other non-visitor post-it

'Little information about the period' Muslim non-visitor post-it

Others fear that there would be a lack of coherence and logical order:

'Disconnection of historical events – is there going to be a flow?' Muslim non-visitor post-it

'Random stuff, things just laying around' Other non-visitor post-it

Another fear presented was that information would be too focussed on Shah 'Abbas, ignoring the wider context, and that it would be presented in a disengaging way:

'That lacklustre effort had been made' Other visitor post-it

'Dry commentary' Iranian visitor post-it

'Dull and boring, only about Shah 'Abbas' Muslim visitor post-it

'A fear perhaps that it's just going to be about him rather than the wider Persian society as a whole' Forum attendee

'Will be a dull collection portrayed as irrelevant to today' Other non-visitor post-it

Finally, a common fear was that information would be inaccessible, aimed at a closed audience and maintaining an inappropriate, highly academic level:

'Material aimed at people with knowledge in the field and not beginners'

Other visitor post-it

'Dry and complicated information' Other visitor post-it

'Too much information to take in' Other non-visitor post-it

'That it's just going to be for the experts and not really for the laymen ... limited visuals, appealing to a closed audience, little information about the period, material aimed at people with knowledge in the field and not at beginners' Forum attender

'It's going to be really complicated information that you won't be able to pick up very easily' Forum attender

The indications here are that the proposition as it is communicated in the poster suggests a dry and boring exhibition experience designed for those 'in the know'.

Stereotyping

The topic of Iran and religion is viewed as a sensitive one given the current political climate and some attenders expressed their fears that this would impact on the exhibition's portrayals of Muslims and the people of Iran.

'Negative image of either Muslims or Iranians' Muslim visitor post-it

'Misunderstanding' Muslim visitor post-it

'Negative images of either Muslims or Iranians which ... is going to be a fear in the current climate of course, we hear lots of negative things' Forum attender

Atmosphere

Persia is seen as a rich, colourful and historical topic and some attenders fear that this will not be reflected in the presentation of the exhibition and that a suitable atmosphere will not be created.

'Unimaginative, boring layout and design' Other non-visitor post-it

'Cold, inappropriate environment' Other non-visitor post-it

'The environment, low key lighting, going to be really dull and not really interactive' Forum attender

Few artefacts and a lack of value for money

Visitors would also be disappointed if there was a limited range of exhibits and interpretation resulting in them walking through the exhibition in a short space of time and subsequently not receiving value for money.

'Limited collection' Muslim non-visitor post-it

'Walk through in 5 minutes' Iranian visitor post-it

'A spacious room half filled with a few artefacts a long way apart' Other non-visitor post-it

'Another few pieces of pottery ' Other visitor post-it

'Short exhibition so not getting money's worth' Muslim visitor post-it

'Fear that I hadn't got my money's worth due to insufficient exhibits' Other visitor post-it

3.2 Hopes

Forum attendees were asked, on the basis of the poster alone, what aspects of an exhibition on Shah 'Abbas would really appeal to them; what positive expectations they held of the exhibition.

Information

Visitors were hoping for a wide array of accessible and educating information. Some were hoping for an exploration of the cultural context of Shah 'Abbas' era.

'Classical Islamic art and culture – pots, pictures, ceramics, gardens' Muslim visitor post-it

'History of culture, architecture of Iran during Shah 'Abbas' Iranian non-visitor post-it

Some visitors were hoping for historical context allowing Shah Abbas' story to fit into more familiar history:

'Before and after Shah' Abbas' Muslim non-visitor post-it

'Background information: linear history' Other visitor post-it

Whilst others were more concerned with social history and the character of the ruler:

'To be able to draw comparisons to modern day political figures' Other visitor post-it

'Shah 'Abbas' personality' Muslim non-visitor post-it

Facts and impartiality

People see the subject matter of Iran as being potentially contentious and it was hoped that a true, impartial picture of the country would be presented.

'An authentic experience as to [what] it was like to live in that era' Other visitor post-it

'People were saying what they really hoped it was like a true picture of Iran, authentic experience ... People hoping It's not one person's view, it's seen in a correct factual way' Forum attender

It seems that some Iranian visitors would be alienated were Shah 'Abbas to be glorified unconditionally.

'To see the real Safavi not the one that pro religious writers have recorded' Iranian non-visitor

'Show the cruel side of Shah 'Abbas, he was a bit naughty sometimes, so show that' Forum attender

Understanding

It was very important to several attenders that the exhibition explained the significance of Shah Abbas' rule in terms of his legacy, relation to culture and the modern day context. People want more than an education on the Persian culture; they want to be able to *understand* it.

'Education and context – not just of Shah 'Abbas but the culture of the world at the time' Muslim visitor post-it

'Understanding other cultures' Muslim visitor post-it

'Show the relevance today and an exhibit demonstrating why he was great. So not just the facts ... but some sort of reporting being requested' Forum attender

'Put the whole thing in context so it isn't just stand-alone things ... a map for the comparison of how it is now and a map of how it was' Forum attender

Exhibition Environment

Particular emphasis was placed on the environment and way in which information was presented whilst attenders expressed their hopes for the

exhibition. These hopes can be explored in terms of visuals, atmosphere and interactive features.

Visuals

Visitors want a visually stunning exhibition in reflection of the Persian culture and its visual impact. They expect beautiful, grand objects that conjure up awe and wonder. They want to be guided through the exhibition via images rather than an over-reliance on reading text.

'Something with 'wow' factor' Other visitor post-it

'Various pictures and paintings of Shah 'Abbas e.g. self portraits, in battle, at home' Muslim non-visitor

'I want to be engaged – visual impact' Other non-visitor post-it

'Joy of looking at paintings and other objects' Muslim visitor post-it

'Wonderful miniature paintings. old Persian carpets depicting the history' Iranian visitor post-it

'A short documentary setting the exhibition in context' Iranian visitor post-it

'A mosaic at the beginning ... something a bit pretty. Not make it like reading a book ... More about visuals; more than just reading things' Forum attender

Atmosphere

There was much discussion about engaging the different senses, with several ideas surfacing such as burning incense as they do in mosques, having traditional music in the background such as Iranian flutes and having sweet meats to taste. Visitors want to feel as if they are being transported back in time to ancient Persia; they want to witness an evocative and experiential proposition. This sensory experience, it was felt, 'would really be something different'.

'Persian sounds/music from era – battle songs, poetry' Muslim non-visitor post-it

'Would transport me to Ancient Iran' Other visitor post-it

'So you don't just feel you are going in and looking at small paintings or something, so you feel like you are in the environment' Forum attender

'People like to have an experience in terms of atmosphere' Forum attender

'Dynamic environment' Other visitor post-it

'People wanted more than visuals because that's ... the bare minimum isn't it? They wanted the atmosphere, they wanted something that would add an ambience, aesthetics, and they wanted to really be part of it ... Persian carpets, attractive, wow factor ... all of these Persian sounds, so it's more than just visuals' Forum attendee

Interactives

Visitors want an exciting, immersive experience that avoids traditional glass cabinets and offers a multi-sensory experience.

'Interactive. That's something we thought was a vital ingredient ... to make this exhibition come to life, there has to be interactive' Forum attendee

The Shah 'Abbas exhibition is viewed as a brave topic area, due to the contention surrounding the character, and is seen by some visitors as a suitable opportunity to 'break with British Museum traditions' as one attendee put it. A variety of methods were put forward to achieve this. Some attendees suggested a more 'hands-on' experience with visitors being allowed to touch the artefacts. Others suggested holding discussion groups in the exhibition or having expert historians and Iranians present to give talks or answer any questions visitors may have. Another suggestion was to have live theatre with actors dressed in traditional costume re-enacting battle or court scenes.

'Artefacts that you can touch' Muslim non-visitor post-it

'Lectures / talks given by experts in the field' Other visitor post-it

'Live theatre ... a depiction of people in that era perhaps ... People dressed up in clothing which would really bring it to life' Forum attendee

Interactive displays were seen as a good way to encourage visitors to further engage with factual information.

'Interactive displays which draw me in and [make me] want to learn more' Other visitor post-it

'Something that would be really educational ... some audio which walks you through' Forum attendee

'An assault on the senses, not just something to read ... discussion groups would be great ... interactive displays, which draw someone in, so obviously they don't realise they're learning when they get drawn in' Forum attendee

'Education is so important once you go in there especially for the average person like myself who doesn't know so much about Shah 'Abbas, so

really set the scene, but that information could be guided throughout as you experience the atmosphere' Forum attendee

Having a more interactive aspect to the exhibition was also seen as a suitable way to engage and entertain younger visitors.

'Dress up thing. It doesn't necessarily appeal to me but I know it does to a lot of other people' Forum attendee

'I think that it should have an area for children, because children often come with their parents' Forum attendee

'If a mum and dad are out with their kids coming to a museum, they would want to ... have displays which their kids would enjoy rather than having to haul them around this exhibition' Forum attendee

4 Reactions to the exhibition

4.1 Reactions to the content

Forum attendees received a presentation by a member of staff detailing the initial plans for the exhibition's content and layout. Although the actual content of the exhibition was generally welcomed, its presentation was deemed to be more in line with people's 'fears' than their 'hopes'. The lack of interactive displays and 'hands-on' content was found to be particularly disappointing:

'That's everything that the fear say that it is, boring and it's just a couple of pots, couple [of] glass cases and that's it. I think that if you look at something from the era ... you can see that ... it's far from minimalist and boring, it is very highly intricate and I just think ... a bit more intricate like you made an effort rather than just any other exhibit where you put something In a glass case' Forum attendee

'What interactive things are there? Are there people you can ask questions to there?' Forum attendee

In relating the knowledge gained on the exhibition proposition from the presentation back to the poster, opinion was divided:

'I think [the poster] does it more justice than what I expected and what I've seen. [The poster] makes it look like it's a colourful exhibition which has been really visually attractive. Whereas on those [presentation] cards ... it's quite monotonous, it's quite minimalist and it's just boring' Forum attendee

'I don't agree with that at all. I think it's the other way round' Forum attendee

4.2 What would draw visitors to the exhibition?

Visitors were asked what would attract them to an exhibition on Shah 'Abbas. Good advertising and special offers were immediately put forward. On a more practical level, visitors don't want to queue to see over-crowded exhibitions, so knowing a good system was in place would encourage them to visit.

'If they are just passing by and they see a 50 person queue, they are just going to walk straight past and not bother, so an efficient system where people can just get in there' Forum attendee

Visitors like the idea that they are experiencing a rare occasion to see renowned exhibits of international importance. They respond to the 'buzz' created around such objects through the media, discussion and recommendation:

'Create a buzz ... special exhibits, so for example the Terracotta Warriors. I mean you've got to go and see the Terracotta Warriors or the Tutankhamen, it's a special exhibit which you want to go and see and people talk about it' Forum attender

'Making it sound like it is something people really, really have got to see. Really big it up as much as you can' Forum attender

'Something distinct and something special about it which would make me want to go and also make it appealing to a broad audience' Forum attender

4.3 What would make visitors recommend the exhibition to others?

Forum attenders stressed the importance of personal recommendations spurring them to visit an exhibition:

'I think the most important way to ... drawing people to an exhibition is by word of mouth: 'this exhibition was amazing, you have to go' ... in order to have that, you need to have a good exhibition to start off with' Forum attender

When asked what would make them recommend the exhibit to a friend there was a definite emphasis on the authentic experience which would set the exhibition apart from others.

'Something which is distinct from any other exhibit. So I mean any museum could put something in a glass case ... somebody mentioned drapes ... just making it ... transport you into a different world' Forum attender

'You could say, this isn't like anything else I've been to, it was a real experience' Forum attender

'Unusual and imaginative' Forum attender

'In addition to actually going to have the experience, I would hope that then I'd learnt this story and come out and say, wow it's a fascinating story, I never knew that' Forum attender

'[An experience] that was different from everything else and made an impact on you' Forum attender

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Review of Title

Shah 'Abbas provokes divided opinion amongst Iranians with secular Iranians viewing him as a ruler who destroyed much of the art and traditions of old Persia and religious Iranians seeing him as a very strong and powerful ruler who wielded enormous influence and has had a lasting legacy. However, the English British Museum visitors and potential visitors have little or no knowledge of Shah 'Abbas, which is for the majority an entirely unfamiliar name.

The current proposed title 'Shah 'Abbas and the remaking of Iran' is therefore only likely to be understood by Iranians and experts – and even then it is met with very divided opinion.

5.2 Image

The selected image for the poster was found to be problematic on two counts. Firstly for those who are familiar with Shah 'Abbas, the image does not reflect the popular image that he was a strong, and influential warrior. Secondly, for those who do not know him the poster fails to convey an attractive proposition.

The poster image should convey more of the richness of the exhibition content, and the strength and influence of Shah 'Abbas.

5.3 Overall Proposition

In following on the heels of the First Emperor and Hadrian the British Museum has set up expectations of exhibitions in the Reading Room. Whereas the Terracotta Army and Roman History have considerable resonance with the public, appealing to a mass market of exhibition attenders that establishes an exhibition as a blockbuster, Shah 'Abbas does not have the same appeal. As a character he is little known and therefore lacks the legendary, iconic appeal of the previous two rulers. It may be worth referring to the First Emperor and Hadrian in some of the Shah 'Abbas marketing material so that people realise that it is part of a series and presents as equal a proposition as the previous two great ruler exhibitions.

As it stands, the proposition will be familiar and appeal to people only with specialist, expert knowledge or cultural familiarity.

A wider proposition would render the exhibition more attractive to a larger audience – an insight into a significant and controversial slice of Persian history, the richness of the architecture and artworks. The promise of an immersive, aesthetically rich experience and the opportunity to learn about a character who had a similar influence over history, belief and culture as, for example, Henry VIII had in England. This proposition needs to be conveyed in the poster, publicity and press coverage.

5.4 Expectations

To satisfy the Iranian community it is important to be explicit about the controversial nature of Shah 'Abbas' reign – how on the one hand his influence on art and history is seen as destructive by those who were persecuted, whilst introducing a flowering of Islamic art on the other.

To do justice to the art and its impact visitors would welcome an interactive and immersive experience that conjures the colours, smells, sounds and ambience of the time.



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