



A
Thousand Years
of the
Persian Book

هزار سال کتاب فارسی

A Thousand Years of the Persian Book

Persian gained prominence as a literary language and a *lingua franca*—a common cultural language—about one thousand years ago. In the past millennium, a rich and varied written and spoken heritage has developed in the Persian language, elevating the visibility of Persian civilization among world intellectual traditions. That tradition is particularly strong in the fields of storytelling, poetry, folklore, and literature, with additional important contributions in historiography, science, religion, and philosophy.

From the tenth-century seminal *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) by Ferdowsi to the works of contemporary writers, the Persian language has changed very little in the last millenium. *A Thousand Years of the Persian Book* examines the richness and variety of the Persian book and its literary tradition. It showcases the Library's unique collections, which are among the most important in the world today outside of Iran. The exhibition focuses on Iran but also includes items from the greater Persian-speaking lands of Afghanistan and Tajikistan, as well as items from Central and South Asia and the Caucasus, illustrating the international nature of the Persian language. In addition to examining the diversity of literary styles, the exhibition demonstrates the continuity of the written word as a unifying cultural force in Persian-speaking lands.

Muhammad Ahlī Shīrāzī. Detail of *The Book of Licit Magic*.
Persia, 1545. Manuscript.
Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division,
Library of Congress (033.00.00)



Writing Systems and Scripts

Persian scripts have evolved over the last 3000 years, with three major historic stages of development, all on display in this exhibition. In ancient Persia (650 BCE–330 BCE), Old Persian was inscribed in the cuneiform script, adapted from the Mesopotamian cultures of the ancient Near East. During the pre-Islamic classical period of the Parthian and Sassanid Persian Empires (248 BCE–651), the Aramaic language gained prominence in many regions of the Persian Empire, influencing the language and writing system of Pahlavi, the middle Persian language. The script used for writing Pahlavi was adapted from the ancient Aramaic script. After the Islamization of Persia, (651–present), a modified Arabic script replaced the older scripts.

Modern Persian is a continuation of the pre-Islamic Pahlavi language that has incorporated many Arabic and Islamic terms. Other writing scripts have also been used for modern Persian. In medieval Persia among Persian-Jewish communities, the Judeo-Persian language, which combines Persian with Hebrew and Aramaic terms, was written using the Hebrew script. In Central Asia during the late Czarist Russian period, a region subsequently controlled by the Soviet Union, the Persian-speaking populations used both Latin and Cyrillic (modified Russian) scripts, which has since resulted in the modern Tajik-Persian script.

The Persian Language

Along with ancient languages such as Sanskrit and Latin and living languages such as English, French, Russian, and Hindi, Persian belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, specifically to the Iranian (Iranic) branch. Persian is also referred to by local regional names such as Farsi in Iran, Dari in Afghanistan, and Tajiki in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. However in English the historic name for the language has always been “Persian.”

The literary and cultural language of the Iranian plateau, the highlands, and plains of Central Asia has been Persian, a language also used extensively throughout South Asia. For centuries, rival empires from the Indian Mughal Empire in the east to the Ottoman Empire in the Mediterranean and the Balkans used Persian language and aesthetics to form the basis of a common tradition that culturally united these vast regions. Today, Persian is spoken in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Pūr Davūd.
Detail of *The Hymns of The Holy Gathas*.
Bombay: Fort Printing Press, 1927.
Near East Section, African and
Middle Eastern Division,
Library of Congress (005.00.00)



Handwritten text in Pahlavi script, consisting of several lines of characters.

Handwritten text in Pahlavi script, consisting of several lines of characters. The text is arranged in a columnar fashion, typical of ancient manuscripts. The characters are stylized and closely spaced.



The Epic of Shahnameh

The seminal work of Persian literature is the *Shahnameh*, an epic poem that recounts the history of pre-Islamic Persia or Iranshahr (Greater Iran). The *Shahnameh* contains 62 stories, told in 990 chapters with 50,000 rhyming couplets. It is divided into three parts—the mythical, heroic, and historical ages. Written in modern Persian, the *Shahnameh* is a work of poetry, historiography, folklore, and cultural identity and is a continuation of the age-old tradition of storytelling in the Near East.

Under the patronage of the Samanid dynasty, Hakīm Abul-Qāsim Firdawsī Tūsī (Ferdowsi) began his epic poem in 977, taking thirty-three years to complete it. The *Shahnameh* was written at a time when modern Persian had started to flourish and the structures and standards for the language were being set.

After its first appearance in 1010, the *Shahnameh* directly affected the epic and poetic works of all Persian speakers and writers for centuries. A number of scholars credit the continuity in modern Persian to the *Shahnameh*. It influenced not just Persian speakers but also the cultures of Turkic peoples in Central Asia, Azerbaijan, and the Ottoman Empire, as well as the Georgian, Kurdish, and Pashto literary traditions. The *Shahnameh* continues to be one of the primary pillars of the modern Persian language.

Ferdowsi. Detail of Selections from the *Shahnameh*.
Manuscript copied in Iran, 1618.
Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division,
Library of Congress (001.00.00)

Science and Technology

Beginning in ancient times Persia has been a center of scientific achievement and was often the conduit of knowledge from China and India in the East to Greece and Rome in the West. Persian-speaking scholars have been active in furthering knowledge in fields of science and technology, such as astronomy, chemistry, anatomy, biology, botany, cosmology, mathematics, engineering, and architecture.

Ancient Sassanid Persia was home to some of the earliest universities and libraries of the ancient world. After the Islamization of Persia (651), middle Persian Pahlavi texts as well as Indian, Chinese, Greek, Aramaic, and Latin scientific texts were translated into Arabic. Although Arabic remains the primary language used for scientific writing in the Islamic world, many scholars have also produced a range of scientific manuscripts and works in the Persian language. The Mughal court in India (1526–1858) became a major center for the production of scientific works in Persian.



Zakariya ibn Muhammad Qazvīnī.
Detail of *Marvels of Creation and Oddities of Existence*. Persia, 1565. Manuscript.
Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division,
Library of Congress (016.00.00)



History

From the tenth century to the late nineteenth century, historical writing became one of the most revered and important literary traditions in the Persian language. These works were often written in prose as well as in verse. Most of the surviving historical works produced in the Persian-speaking world are from the Islamic period (651–present).

Historians, scholars, rulers, and elites from various regions of India, the Central Asian Khanates, the various city centers of Iran and Afghanistan, and the Ottoman lands have produced a wide range of historical manuscripts and lithographic printed books in Persian. Subjects covered include travel literature, world history, current events, and traditional subjects such as the history of Islamic civilization.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, as contact with the West increased and as Western travel diaries and travel literature became available to readers in Persian lands, a new tradition of *Safarnamah* (travelogue) writing spread in the region. By the late nineteenth-early twentieth century *Safarnamah* literature became a mainstream genre in Persian historiography.

Muḥammad Amīn ibn Abī al-Ḥusayn Qazvīnī.
Detail of *The Book of the King*. India, 1825. Manuscript.
Rare Book and Special Collections Division,
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Literature

The richness of Persian literature, one of the world's oldest, can be traced back to medieval classical Persian. Beginning in the tenth century and lasting well into the sixteenth century, classical Persian poetry and prose flourished. During this classical period, poetry became the dominant form of literary expression. It was the medium in which almost all intellectual pursuits were expressed, a tradition often supported by royal patronage.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, increased contact with Europe, especially with Russia and Britain, changed the traditions of writing poetry, literature, and history. However, Persian-speaking communities, which had for centuries prized Persian calligraphy as a high art form, did not immediately adopt the printing press. From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century lithography became the preferred medium used to print Persian books, since it could better replicate calligraphic styles.

During the early modern period, Persian literature evolved to include genres in prose such as short stories, novels, satire, and humor. Persian writers introduced new themes related to nationalism and national identity. Free verse poetry also found an audience among the new literary elites. Prose became an important literary form and flourished in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. The number of authors greatly increased, and women writers gained much higher visibility. Today, Persian writers, some using regional and national variations of the Persian language, continue to create poetry, prose, novels, short stories, essays, and children's stories.

Embossed leather book cover.
Nineteenth-century Qajar Era. Kirkor Minassian Collection,
Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division,
Library of Congress (036.01.00)

Classical Persian Poetry

Created as highly illustrated manuscripts, these masterpieces of Persian poetry demonstrate the important place of literature, poetry, and bookmaking in the Persian-speaking world. From the tenth century to the sixteenth century Persian classical poetry developed as a literary language by adapting the meter and rhyme scheme of the Arabic poetic tradition. Even the written works by philosophers, historians, and scientists were often delivered in verse. During this period, three major styles of Persian poetry came to prominence: the epic panegyric Khorasani style, developed around the tenth century in eastern Persia; the *Iraq-i 'Ajami* (Western Persian style) that emerged in the thirteenth century, a lyrical style that uses mystical Sufi concepts; and the *Sabk-i Hindi* (the Indian style), which emerged in the fifteenth century. Despite differences among the various styles, there remains continuity in the poetic and aesthetic styles of classical Persian poetry, present in works produced as early as the tenth century by the poet Rūdakī up to the works of the fifteenth-century poet Jāmī.



Shams al-Dīn Muhammad Hāfiz-i Shīrāzī.
Detail of *Anthology of Hāfiz*. Persia, 1685. Manuscript.
Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division,
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Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Literature

Modern nation states and distinct national identities emerged in the Persian-speaking region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this transitional period, as Persian speakers came into contact with the West, a number of intellectual and social movements paved the way for changes to traditional structures of writing literature and bookmaking. Literary trends in Europe particularly affected the use of the Persian language and its development in Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Turkestan (Central Asia). As lithographic Persian book printing became widespread, book publishing centers developed in Bombay, Tbilisi, Istanbul, Cairo, Tabriz, Tehran, Herat, Kabul, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Persian classics were reprinted during this period and short stories, novels, satire, and humor were introduced to regional mass audiences. The theme of nationalism in literature also gained prominence.



Detail of selections of classical Persian poetry.
Iran, late eighteenth–early nineteenth century. Manuscript.
Near East Section, African and Middle Eastern Division,
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Modern and Contemporary Literature

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century Persian literature continues to evolve within a changing and sometimes disruptive political climate in the region. In the twentieth century, standardization of the Persian language, a focus on education, and an engagement in social and political discourse became popular themes throughout the region. Old poetic structures, seen as inadequate to reflect modern concerns, gave way to vibrant and expressive methods of literary self-expression. The region has also witnessed a tremendous expansion in the number of genres and authors from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, as well as from diaspora communities that continue to publish in Persian.



Omar Khayyam. Detail of *Rubáiyát*. Translated by Edward FitzGerald with illustrations by Arthur Szyk. New York: Heritage Press, ca. 1946. Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress (028.00.00) Reproduced with the cooperation of The Arthur Szyk Society, Burlingame, California www.szyk.org

چون خرامی بچمن سر و قد لاله غذا
عشوہ پرداز دلارام بت شکر لب
مجلس آرای جفا پیشه لنگر جانب ما
نیست د خلد برین جور به مانده تو

دست در گردن تو جنب گلزار خوش
بوسه زان حقه شیرین گهر بار خوش
شیدوہ سامریت شوخ ستم کار خوش
جلوہ ناز تو بس ای بت عینا خوش

عایشه گریه د از پیرمغان موی طلسمی
بگذر از لا و نعم ساکن خار خوش

بیای که مرا با تو آشناینهاست
بتادمان تو خوشتر بود ز آجیات
فراق آمد و برد از برم رفیق شفیق
کجا روم ز که پرسم نشان آن محبوب
سیا بجانب بستان که فرح می بخشد
زدست ساقی گل چهره پری سکر
مرو بصومعه کا نجاسی بود قطع
بسیج دز روم خرناب پیرمغان
رسید مرده که عایشه غم مخور زنها

دل مدام خراب از غم جداینهاست
تبسم از لب لعلت چه در فشانهاست
رضا بگرم خودم این چه زندگانیهاست
بوصل دوست رسیدن چو شاداینهاست
که موسم طرب و عشرت و جوانیهاست
بنوش باده که ایام شادمانیهاست
سیاه میگذرد کین جا امان اینهاست
که بر من از سر لطفش چه مهربانیهاست
مدد علی ولی وقت کامرانیهاست

Women Writers

Women poets and authors have been producing important literary works in Persian for centuries. During the medieval period, Persian-speaking women who enjoyed royal patronage or who were themselves from a privileged class received the benefits of education and had the means and the opportunity to write and recite poetry. Medieval works by women retained the structure of classical Persian poetry, and their writings covered themes ranging from love and humor to rebellion and sorrow, often expressed in a more intimate and personalized manner than poetry written by their male counterparts. As economic development and political stability grew in the sixteenth century in Safavid Persia and Mughal India, poetry and written works by women became more widespread there. By the nineteenth century, as part of a broader revival of Persian literary arts and a rise in universal education and social movements influenced by the West, many more opportunities for women to write presented themselves. Since the twentieth century there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women poets and writers from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan who have given voice to women's perspectives. Today, the number of Persian-speaking women authors almost equals those of men, with their works often outselling those by men in the marketplace.



Storytelling and Children's Literature

Whether a lullaby, a grandmother's bedtime story, or a tale from *A Thousand and One Nights* told by the heroine Scheherazade, the oral tradition of storytelling has been prominent in the culture and traditions of Persian speakers. For hundreds of years these stories have formed a rich foundation for Persian authors of children's books.

In the twentieth century, as universal education gained national prominence, children's books became an important genre in Persian literature, aiming at not only entertaining but also educating and promoting cultural values. In Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan a notable number of children's books that are richly illustrated have been produced. In the diaspora, Iranian and Afghan communities have expanded the audience for these works by utilizing computer graphics, graphic novels, and animation, as well as translating into English many noteworthy Persian titles.

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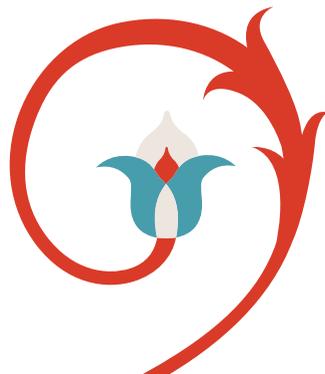
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