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# Embark on a journey through millennia in the National Museum of Iran

## Iranica Desk

The National Museum of Iran holds the distinction of being the oldest, most important, largest, and richest museum in Iran. It is divided into two sections: Iran Bastan (Ancient Iran) and the Museum of the Islamic Era. The Iran Bastan section showcases historical objects from the Paleolithic to the Sassanid periods, while the Islamic section displays artifacts from the Islamic era.

Established as the country's first official museum, the National Museum of Iran boasts a foundation of over 20,000 square meters and a total area of 18,000 square meters. It houses an impressive collection of over 300,000 objects from various cultural eras of

Iran, spanning from prehistoric times to the Islamic era.

The idea of establishing a museum in Iran was initially proposed by Sani al-Dawlah during the early years of the Constitutional era. However, it wasn't realized at that time. It was not until the reign of Ahmad Shah Qajar, under the efforts of Morteza Khan Momtaz al-Mamalek, the Minister of Education at the time, when a collection of objects was gathered and kept in a room at Darolfonoon School, under the name of the National Museum. Subsequently, during the first Pahlavi period in 1925, the National Museum was relocated to the Mirror Hall of Masoudieh Mansion in Baharestan Square.

The museum's initial collection in-

cluded items such as 15 carved antiques, 158 pieces of pottery, ceramics, and glass, nine coins, and 54 ancient weapons, guns, helmets, armor, items obtained from archaeological excavations, and donated items from private collectors.

In 1927, the National Consultative Assembly (Parliament) annulled the French monopoly on archaeological excavations in the country and, in exchange, granted them the right to excavate in Susa. Additionally, the government approved the construction of a museum and library, with a French individual appointed as its head for up to five years. Consequently, in that year, André Godard, a renowned French architect, arrived in Iran and, with the assistance of two Iranian ar-

chitects named Hajj Abbasali Memarbashi and Morad Tabrizi, commenced the construction of the National Museum of Iran in the western part of Mashq Square in 1933.

The National Museum of Iran, situated near 30th Tir Street on the north side of Imam Khomeini Street, and west of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, underwent construction beginning in 1933, lasting four years across four phases. The museum, characterized by red brick adornments, takes the form of a horizontal rectangle resting on the ground, comprising three distinct yet interconnected sections.

In the design of the museum's entrance, Godard drew inspiration from the Sassanid Ctesiphon Palace and the renowned Kasra Arch (Taq-e Kasra),

incorporating elements from Iranian architecture such as the arrangement of bricks on the interior surfaces of the porch and its surrounding structures. The entrance features a porch with a crescent-shaped arch, notable for its unconventional absence of typical decorations found in such structures. Flanking the entrance are two two-story buildings housing the library, exhibition halls, and conference halls. Above the door, a marble inscription displays a poem by Mohammad Taqi Bahaar, penned in Thuluth script by Amir Al-Ketab Malik Al-Kalam. The Ancient Iran Museum showcases artifacts from the prehistoric era to the Sassanid period in two sections, spanning prehistoric and historical periods of Iran, across two floors.

## First floor

We recommend beginning your museum visit on the first floor, where you will encounter objects from the earliest period of human history, spanning from the Paleolithic era to the end of the fourth millennium BCE, predating the invention of writing. Highlights of this section include stone tools from the Paleolithic era, pottery from significant archaeological sites and regions, human and animal figurines, and a model of the Chogha Zanbil Ziggurat.



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## Ground floor

After exploring the prehistoric period on the first floor, you will transit into the realm of history and civilization on the ground floor. This section showcases artifacts from the dawn of writing to the end of the Sassanid period, spanning from the end of the fourth millennium BCE to the conclusion of the Sassanid era. Notable objects in this section include the world's oldest animation on a pottery from Shahr-e Sookhteh (the Burnt City), the statue of Darius the Great, and the Salt Man from the Zanjan mine.



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## Museum of Islamic Era

The Museum of the Islamic Era was originally designed in 1943 by Eugene Aftandilian, in collaboration with Andre Godard as an anthropology museum. However, the building was subsequently repurposed for administrative functions, temporary exhibitions, and conferences. Firstly, the collection of Islamic art was on display on the second floor of the Iran Ancient Museum. However, due to the signifi-

cance of the period, it was later decided to establish an independent museum for that. Following renovations, building enhancements, and artifact transfers, the Islamic Period Museum officially opened in this building in 1996.

Years later, the museum underwent further improvements, including facility expansions, space enhancements, and a review of artifact display methods,

leading to its closure and subsequent reopening in 2005. The design and layout of the Islamic Period Museum draw inspiration from the plan of the Sassanid palace in Bishapur.

## From Timurid to Qajar

The first floor of the Museum of the Islamic Era encompasses halls dedicated to the Holy Qur'an, spanning the Timurid, Safavid, Afsharid, Zand, and



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Qajar periods. On display are bookbinding and illustrations from the Timurid era, blue and white Chinese ceramics, Safavid brocades, paintings and lacquers from the Zand and Qajar periods, coffeehouse paintings, woodworks, and gold-plated steel mirrors from the Qajar era.

## From early Islam to the Ilkhanid period

The second-floor features halls

representing early Islam, the Seljuk and Ilkhanid eras. Notable exhibits include Holy Qur'ans written on deer skin, pottery from Neishabur and Kashan, ancient handwoven fabrics from Rey and Isfahan, glassware from Gorgan, stuccos and brickworks from the Seljuk period, gold-plated vessels and grand mihrabs from the Ilkhanids, and calligraphic manuscripts, along with the Panj Ganj

book of Nizami.

## Holy Qur'an Hall

The central space under the main dome on the first floor is dedicated to the Qur'an Hall. Some of the Holy Qur'ans, dating back to the early Islamic centuries, are written on deer skin. An intriguing example is a Qur'an with marginal notes attributed to Imam Ali (PBUH). The Holy Qur'ans in this hall are written in various scripts such as Kufic, Naskh, Reyhan, Mohaqiq, and Thuluth. Additionally, a page from a large and precious Holy Qur'an written by Baysonghor Mirza is displayed, which Nader Shah transferred from Herat to Khorasan, carrying it in front of his army during battles to protect the soldiers.

## Facilities

**Library:** The National Museum of Iran's library, established concurrently with the museum, houses a rich and important collection of books in the field of archaeology and history. It includes handwritten and lithographic books, and lithographic copies of the Holy Qur'an from the Qajar period.

**Gallery:** A handicraft gallery is situated within the National Museum of Iran, offering visitors the opportunity to view and purchase items after touring the museum.

**Café:** Following an exploration of Iranian history in the museum, visitors can enjoy a cup of tea or coffee in the café at the National Museum of Iran.