



Bronze finial, Lorestan, 8th–7th centuries BCE.
● ISNA

Hermitage museum preserves priceless treasures of ancient Iran



Gilt silver vessel, 6th century CE
● ISNA



Gold griffin with inlaid decoration, 4th century BCE.
● ISNA

Iranica Desk

Iran's historical heritage has long occupied a prominent place in the world's leading museums, from the Louvre Museum in France to the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the United States. Yet Russia's Hermitage Museum also holds an extensive and remarkable collection reflecting the depth of Iranian culture and history. On the occasion of International Museum Day, observed annually on May 18 around the world, attention turns to some of the museum's most significant Iranian artifacts — treasures that have received comparatively little international attention. The Hermitage, one of the world's most visited museums, houses more than 2.5 million historical and artistic objects, with Iranian works forming a substantial part of its collection. Many of these pieces arrived in Russia through commercial and cultural agreements forged during the wars between Iran and Russia in the Qajar era.

According to Ancient Iranian Heritage by Mohammad Ali Alavi Kia, numerous objects also left Iran during the reign of Fat'h-Ali Shah, including manuscripts from the library of Sheikh Safi al-Din in Azarbaijan, which were seized under Russian occupation. Among the oldest Iranian objects in the Hermitage are 55 painted Elamite ceramic vessels dating back to the late 4th and 3rd millennia BCE — approximately 5,000 to 6,000 years ago. These artifacts were donated to the museum in the early 20th century by the French archaeological mission excavating in Iran. The collection also includes Lorestan bronzes from the 13th to 8th centuries BCE, featuring bracelets, pins, bronze figurines, and pottery. Several Iron Age vessels of the Hasanlu type and a red-glazed ceramic piece from Amlash, donated by renowned scholar Arthur Upham Pope, are also preserved there.

Achaemenid splendor

The Hermitage's Achaemenid collection, dating from the 6th to

4th centuries BCE, includes a fragment of the Persepolis reliefs depicting the head of an "Immortal" guard from the royal army. The piece was presented to the museum by the Iranian government in 1935 during an international exhibition of Iranian art. Other notable works from the period include a golden cup with lion-shaped handles, gold jewelry, necklaces adorned with semi-precious stones, plaques depicting a winged figure believed by some scholars to symbolize Ahura Mazda, and various animal sculptures. The museum's Achaemenid seal collection features a cylinder seal from the late 5th century BCE portraying the victory of a Persian king over Egypt, along with agate and carnelian seals executed in a Greco-Persian style.

Parthian collection

The Parthian era at the Hermitage is represented primarily through discoveries from the ancient city of Nisa, located in present-day Turkmenistan and once home to one of the earliest Parthian royal palaces. Excavations conducted between 1947 and 1963 uncov-

ered a wealth of material later donated to the museum by the Turkmen government.

Among the most important pieces are four ivory rhytons from the 2nd century BCE and decorative clay plaques from the palace complex. The museum also preserves more than 2,600 administrative documents linked to Parthian royal stores — records considered crucial to understanding the economy and history of the Parthian Empire. In 1996, the Hermitage acquired a rare Parthian metalwork masterpiece: a gilded silver plate bearing the image of a mountain goat and a lengthy Parthian inscription indicating that the object belonged to Narseh, son of Artabanus and Sasanian viceroy of the Caucasus in the mid-3rd century CE.

Largest collection of Sassanid silverware

The Hermitage possesses the world's largest collection of Iranian and Central Asian silver vessels from the 3rd to 9th centuries CE. Many of these artifacts were discovered in treasure hoards and accidental finds near Russia's Kama

and Ob river regions.

The collection includes three gold vessels and more than 35 Sassanid silver plates, the most famous of which depict royal hunting scenes. Some scholars believe several of the pieces date to the late Sassanid era and even into the 8th century. The museum also houses more than 1,200 Sassanid seals, including an amethyst seal belonging to Queen Deng, wife of Yazdegerd II, as well as seals engraved with lengthy Middle Persian inscriptions.

Rare treasury of coins

With more than 3,000 specimens, the Hermitage's Parthian coin collection ranks among the finest in the world. It includes rare coins minted under Mithridates II and pieces issued by lesser-known branches of the Parthian dynasty in Sistan. The museum's Sassanid coin collection exceeds 6,000 pieces and is considered one of the richest globally. Among its highlights are rare coins of Hormizd II and Khosrow I and II, alongside imitation coins struck in Central Asia.

Beyond historical Iran, the Hermitage also preserves a vast collection of Iranian-influenced art and culture from Central Asia, ranging from Bactrian and Khwarazmian vessels to Sogdian artifacts, murals, clay sculptures, and Buddhist works.

Sogdian art occupies a particularly important place in the museum. Murals, wooden and clay statues, and artifacts excavated from Panjakent — a major city in present-day Tajikistan — form some of the collection's most celebrated holdings. Several paintings depict scenes from the Panchatantra, the Mahabharata, and epic tales of Rostam. Many of these artifacts have been restored by Hermitage specialists, with some later returned to museums and academic institutions in Tajikistan after conservation work.

Today, the Iranian collection at the Hermitage stands not only as one of the most important repositories of ancient Iranian art outside Iran, but also as a foundational resource for scholarly research into pre-Islamic Iranian art and metalwork.

4,800-year-old Anubanini Relief seeks recognition in Kermanshah

Iranica Desk

Thanks to its four-season climate, towering mountains, fertile plains, abundant rivers and springs, and strategic location along the ancient route connecting the Iranian plateau to Mesopotamia, the western Iranian province of Kermanshah has long been a focal point for civilizations, empires, and rulers throughout history. The province is home to nearly 5,000 identified historical sites, making it one of Iran's three richest provinces in terms of archaeological heritage. Yet despite this wealth of antiquities, only a handful of landmarks — including the UNESCO-listed Bisotun Inscription, Taq-e Bostan, the Temple of Anahita, Biglarbeigi Tekyeh, and Moaven al-Molk Tekyeh — have received national and international recognition, according to ISNA. Historians and cultural heritage experts say that nearly 99 per-

cent of Kermanshah's historical treasures remain largely unknown, despite many possessing cultural value equal to or even greater than the province's most famous monuments. As Iran marks Cultural Heritage Week (May 18–24), renewed attention is being drawn to one such neglected site: the Anubanini Inscription in Sarpol-e Zahab, which some historians consider one of the oldest inscriptions in both Iran and the Middle East. The ancient relief and inscription were first documented in 1836 by British orientalist Henry Rawlinson near the Alvand River on Mount Patir, north of Sarpol-e Zahab — a city regarded by some scholars as one of the world's oldest urban settlements. Archaeologists estimate the inscription to be around 4,800 years old, making it the oldest known rock relief inscription in Iran. It was commissioned by Anubanini, king of the Lul-



iraniraniha.ca

lubi people, who ruled parts of western Iran during the third millennium BCE, before the rise of the Medes. The Lullubi inhabited mountainous regions stretching from present-day Iraqi Kurdistan to western Iran, including modern-day Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Ilam, and parts of West

Azarbaijan Province. Historical records indicate that they traded with the Babylonians and were twice defeated by Akkadian rulers. The rock relief, carved 16 meters above ground level, depicts King Anubanini standing triumphantly over a captive. In one hand he holds a weapon, while the other carries a bow. Opposite him stands the goddess Ishtar, presenting him with the ring of power. Behind Ishtar, two kneeling prisoners await punishment, while six additional captives appear in the lower register of the relief. The accompanying inscription introduces both the king and the monument while invoking curses upon anyone who might damage the relief in the future. It calls upon deities including Ishtar, Shamash, Anu, Antum, and Sin to punish violators and extinguish their lineage. Experts believe the Anubanini relief later inspired other royal inscriptions, including

the famed Bisotun Inscription commissioned centuries later by Achaemenid King Darius the Great.

Despite its historical significance, the monument remained largely unknown for decades — partly because it was enclosed within the courtyard of a girls' school in Sarpol-e Zahab, limiting public access and visibility.

Ironically, the devastating 7.3-magnitude earthquake that struck Sarpol-e Zahab in 2017 helped bring the monument back into public view. The school surrounding the site was destroyed in the quake, eventually allowing cultural heritage authorities to reclaim and protect the area after years of negotiations with the Education Ministry. According to Mozaffar Gholami, head of Sarpol-e Zahab's

Cultural Heritage Office, the Anubanini Inscription has the potential to become one of Kermanshah's premier historical attractions alongside Bisotun and Taq-e Bostan — provided it receives sufficient funding and promotion.

"Anubanini spent years trapped inside a school courtyard and never had the opportunity to be properly introduced to the public," Gholami said. "Now that the site has been freed, provincial authorities are expected to pay greater attention to it." He added that the monument has suffered extensive damage over its nearly 5,000-year history, including erosion and the impacts of the Iran-Iraq War.

"To gain national and international recognition, Anubanini needs proper promotion, conferences, and preservation efforts," he said.

