



KARL SINGAPOREWALA:

COSMOS /
MEMORY /
SCALE .

SOAS
GALLERY



FOREWORD

by Mariano Errichiello

Curating Identity: Art, Religion and the Self

This exhibition marks a special milestone for the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies at SOAS. It is the first public outcome of our newly launched Artist-in-Residence Fellowship, an initiative that brings together artists, researchers, students, heritage professionals and community members to explore how art can communicate complex questions about religion, identity and memory. At its core, the Fellowship is an invitation to dialogue: a space where different generations and worldviews within the Zoroastrian tradition can meet, reflect and engage.

In the years to come, we aim to regularly welcome artists whose work responds to pressing research questions. This year, we are proud to feature Karl Singporewala RWA RIBA as our inaugural fellow, responding to the question: *How do religion, aesthetics and materiality shape identity formation?* A Parsi Zoroastrian artist and architect, Singporewala's practice moves fluidly between sculpture, design and architectural form, engaging with themes of belonging, diaspora and memory. During his time with us, he has created a number of new large-scale commissions that form the core of this exhibition, alongside a selection of current practice and earlier works, as well as loaned objects that deepen and expand the conversation.

Guided by the principles of critical pedagogy and open-access research, our aim has been to present a co-curated thoughtful, accessible and inclusive exhibition that speaks across aesthetic sensibilities, modes of interpretation and lived experiences. The result is a dynamic visual journey into how objects associated with Zoroastrian religious life carry meaning and memory.

Singporewala's work is deeply personal yet widely resonant. Drawing on the symbolism of the ses, a ritual tray used in many Zoroastrian homes, he reimagines sacred domestic objects as sculptural vessels through which identity is negotiated and reconfigured. These new commissions are not mere representations; they are architectural meditations on what it means to inhabit multiple worlds — religious, secular, diasporic — at once.

This exhibition unfolds at a time when questions of heritage and identity are felt acutely within the Zoroastrian community. The interplay between tradition and transformation, belonging and memory, animates both Singporewala's practice and the broader conversation we hope this project fosters. As you walk through the gallery, we invite you to observe, engage and reflect on the objects, the stories they carry and the ways in which they shape, mirror or even challenge the notion of identity.

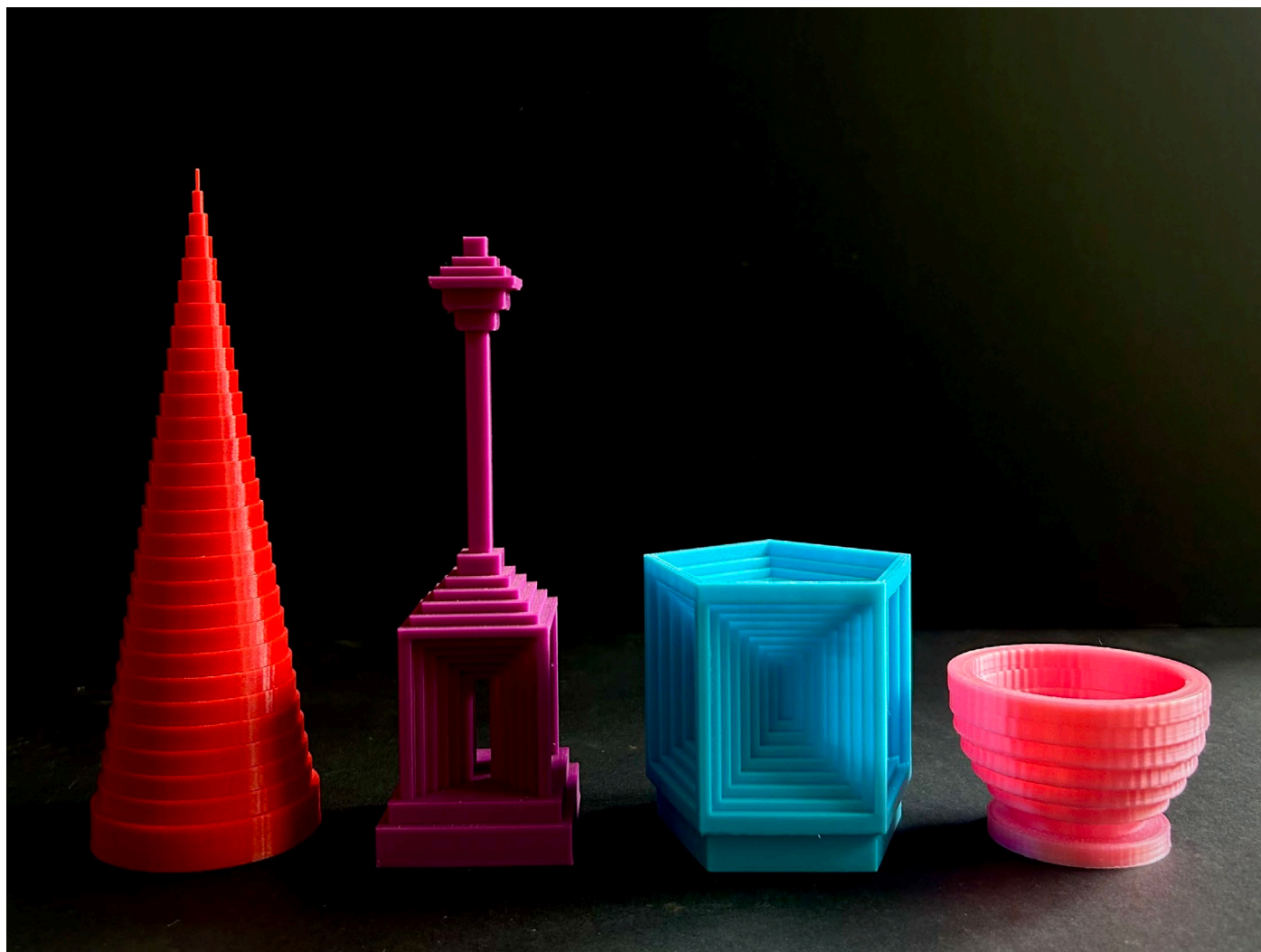
We extend our sincere gratitude to the SOAS Gallery, the SOAS Collections and Galleries Panel, the Zeena Ralph Memorial Trust, the SOAS Research Culture Flexible Fund, the British Institute of Persian Studies, the British Museum, the Special Collections and Digitisation teams of the SOAS Library, SOAS Research, Knowledge Exchange and Impact teams, the Opera di Religione della Diocesi di Ravenna, Zar Amroliia, the V&A Museum, Creative Crawley, Theatre Centre and the Singporewala family for their generous support in bringing this exhibition to fruition. We are especially indebted to our benefactor, Shapoor Mistry, whose vision and generosity have made this initiative possible.

We hope the Artist-in-Residence Fellowship will mark the beginning of a lasting and collaborative platform for practice-led research and public engagement at SOAS — a space where artistic expression and academic inquiry meet, where diverse voices are welcomed and where new ways of seeing, knowing and imagining can take shape.

In dialogue and with sincere appreciation,

Mariano Errichiello

Shapoorji Pallonji Lecturer
Co-Chair and Executive Director of the Shapoorji Pallonji
Institute of Zoroastrian Studies
SOAS University of London



CURATORIAL STATEMENT

by Asmara Rabier & Danielle Khleang

In *Cosmos, Memory, Scale* British artist and architect Karl Singporewala invites us into his personal and expansive world where the vastness of the universe meets the intimacy of family memory. This solo exhibition presents a body of work shaped by heritage, parenthood and architectural practice, offering a unique lens on how identity can be explored and expressed through material, scale and form. Singporewala engages his Parsi heritage through the language of design, asking how tradition might be constructed, how memory can occupy space, and how material becomes a vessel for continuity.

The exhibition's title reflects three interconnected themes that run through Singporewala's practice. **Cosmos** speaks to both his fascination with astrophysics together with a metaphysical belief in the alignments of life. Stars and geometric forms recur as motifs, refracting both spiritual navigation and mathematical structure. In works like *Follow Me, Follow Me*, multifaceted sculptures function like celestial bodies: markers of time, direction and possibility.

Memory is treated as a living, shifting phenomenon. Inspired by oral tradition, family stories and inherited rituals, Singporewala's understanding of history is always shifting and evolving. His pieces embody the idea that memory is not fixed but is reshaped each time it is recalled. The recurring scenes, sacred household objects in Zoroastrian homes, appears here across generations and multiple scales, evolving from domestic altar to monumental sculpture. By making these forms life size, the artist reclaims them as objects of play, continuity and transformation.

Scale, finally, is used both literally and metaphorically. Singporewala's architectural background is evident in the precision of his craft: laser-cut metals, intricate maquettes and digitally modelled geometries serve as examples. Yet, beyond technique, scale becomes a narrative device. The shift in perception as one approaches an object, the change in significance when a childhood toy becomes a reimagined symbol or the emotional weight an object gathers over time. *The Last Tower of Silence*, for instance, reimagines a traditional Zoroastrian funerary site as a vertical skyscraper, simultaneously a memorial and a structure of rebirth.

The exhibition also includes selected artefacts from institutional collections, such as a cast of the Darius Seal from the British Museum, displayed alongside representations of Zarathustra and religious objects from the artist's family home. Selected manuscripts, maps and archival images drawn from private collectors and the SOAS archives are also present. These inclusions are set in dialogue with Singporewala's artworks to foreground the conditions under which a Parsi imaginary has been aestheticised and rearticulated within the exhibition space. While dipping into the potency of cultural-religious-spiritual artefacts spanning decades in the artist's career, he reminds us that it is not a body of work about devotion nor a retrospective, but a meditation on how material and memory intersect to shape the human experience. Singporewala's sculpture offers us ways to think about how the past, whether familial, cultural or cosmological, shapes the forms we build, the symbols we carry and the decisions we make that define our stories.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY



Karl Singaporewala RWA RIBA (b.1983) is a British architect and artist whose work explores the intersections of heritage, memory, and contemporary design. An RWA Academician at the Royal West of England Academy, his practice spans sculpture, installation and architectural design.

In 2024, he founded Karl Singaporewala + the design bureau (KSdb), a multidisciplinary studio with current architecture projects in Crawley, Brighton, London, Bristol and Manchester. A graduate of De Montfort University, Leicester, and the University of Brighton—where he was nominated for the RIBA Silver Medal—he completed his architectural training at The Bartlett, UCL.

His early career includes collaborations on award-winning contemporary, cultural and historical projects across the UK and Europe, working at design practices Barbara Weiss Architects and Ian Ritchie Architects (now ritchie*studio).

Singaporewala currently serves on the Royal West of England Academy Council and Exhibitions Advisory Committee, and is a Trustee of Theatre Centre, a national theatre company which commissions trailblazing new writing for young people. In 2025 he was appointed as a Community Fellow of SOAS University of London.

His artwork is held in public and private collections, including the RWA, Bristol UK, and the Hamilton Princess, Bermuda. Past group exhibitions include the Saatchi Gallery, Onassis Cultural Centre Athens, V&A Digital Futures, the New York Institute of Technology and the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

Select exhibitions

2025

Keki's fusion - public sculpture (Manor Royal, UK)
Paperworks (RWA, Bristol, UK)
Unit 78/79 Creative Crawley (Crawley, UK)
Vibrancy (Artcan Hub, Angel, UK)

2024

Starbucks / MCD - public sculptures (Gatwick Road, UK)
Allegory (RWA, Kenny Gallery, Bristol UK)
Strands (Artcan, The Department Store, Brixton, UK)
Sugar Beach Art Collection (St Lucia)

2023

Crawley Stories - Theatre Centre (Crawley, UK)
Home (Artcan, The Department Store, Brixton, UK)
Sussex Contemporary exhibition (i360 Brighton UK)
Street Life (RWA, Kenny Gallery, Bristol UK)
Article 25 Humanitarian Architecture auction (Hatton Gardens, London)

2022

Enliven - New civic mural (Crawley Library, UK)
Legacy (Artcan, Crypt Gallery, London UK)
RWA Candidates Exhibition (Kenny Gallery, Bristol UK)

2021

Inspire - D Contemporary (Mayfair, London UK)
Hamilton Princess Art Collection (Bermuda)

2019

Fire: Flashes to Ashes Exhibition (RWA, Bristol, UK)
22 Bishopsgate Entrance (London, UK)

2018

INTBAU (The Prince's Foundation, London, UK)

2017

stART (Saatchi Gallery, London, UK)
V&A Digital Futures (EVA London, UK)
FCA Entrance Foyer (Canary Wharf, London UK)
UK DIT Pavilion MIPIM (Cannes, France)

2015

Lumen Digital Art Prize World Tour
Llandaff Cathedral (Cardiff, Wales, UK)
Onassis Cultural Centre (Athens Greece)
New York Institute of Technology (New York, USA)
Art 'otel (Amsterdam, Netherlands)

2014

The Shard (London, UK)
HIX Art Prize - Cock 'n' Bull Gallery (London, UK)
Aesthetica Art Prize Exhibition (York St Mary's, UK)

2013

St Martins College (London, UK)
Somerset House (London, UK)

2007-2017

Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition (London, UK)

2011-2025

Royal West of England Academy of Arts Annual Open
(Bristol, UK)

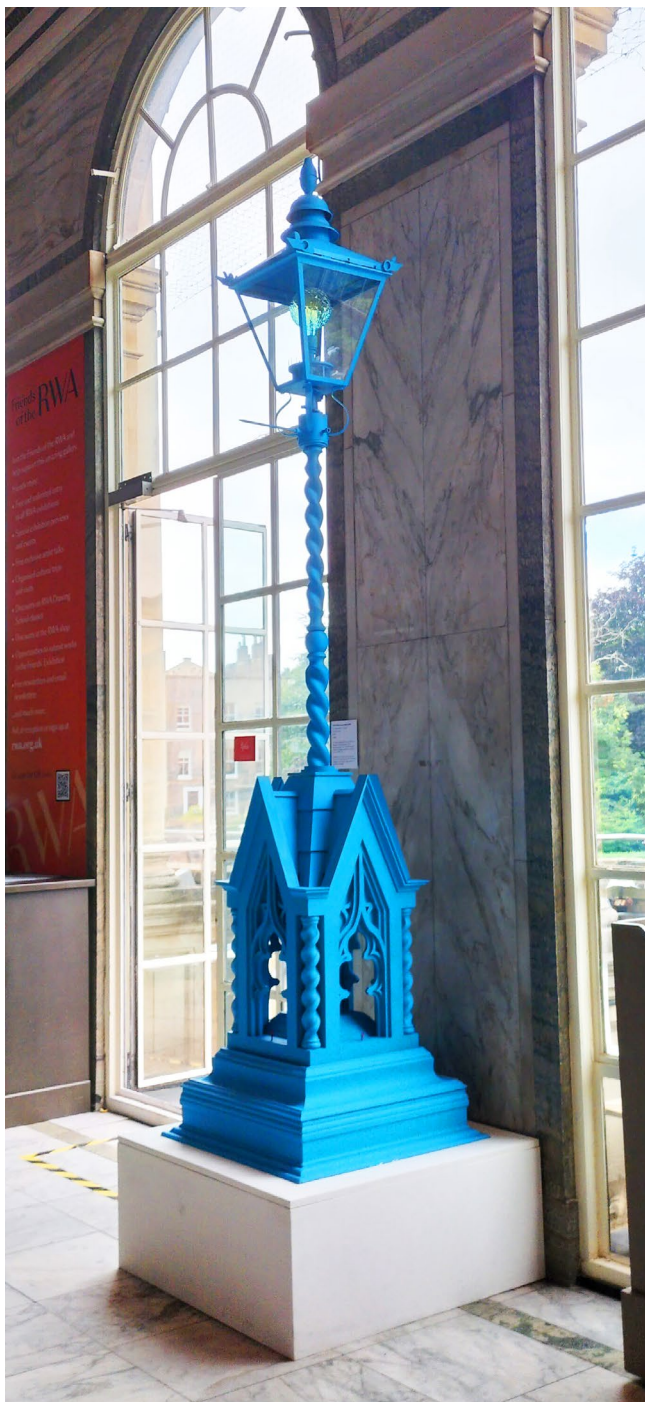
TO LUCY BARFIELD AND SIBLINGS

MY DEAR PETER, EDMUND, SUSAN and LUCY,

I designed these lighthouses for you, but when I began it I had not realised that children grow quicker than buildings. As a result you are already too old for the sentiment, and by the time it is exhibited or even built you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start enjoying my buildings again. You can then explore them, get lost in them, and tell me what you think of the work. I shall probably be too deaf to hear, and too old to understand, a word you say, but I shall still be

your affectionate father,

K. K. Singporewala



No.0

or in the dream of a dream 2024

Size: 800x800x2800mm

Medium: Timber and steel

Singaporewala connects the magical creation tale of Narnia to his own cultural background, memories and children using Tower Bridge in London as his entry point.

This lighthouse stands as a beacon at the intersection of the glistening eastern sea, the great western wood, the radiant southern sun and the clear northern sky.

Lighthouses are there as a threshold to warn you and stop you from getting too close, but like a lamppost in the dead of night, they also light the way home.



Lighthouses 2025

No.1

Soparo (red)

Size: 1000x1000x2450mm

Medium: Timber

No.2

Divo (blue)

Size: 960x960x1200mm

Medium: Timber

No.3

Pigani (pink)

Size: 1150x1150x800mm

Medium: Timber

No.4

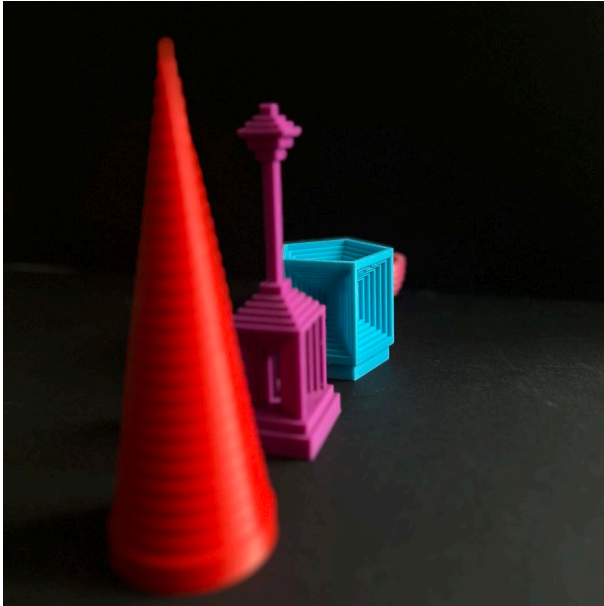
Gulabdan (purple)

Size: 720x720x2900mm

Medium: Timber

Lighthouses expands the domestic ses into four monumental sculptures that trace a lineage of memory, ritual and form. Traditionally, the ses consists of symbolic vessels including the *sopāro*, a conical sugar container representing the cosmic axis or mountain; the *pigāni*, a bowl containing vermillion, or kanku powder; the *divo*, an oil lamp representing divine illumination; and the *gulābdān*, a rosewater sprinkler used for purification and blessing. These objects, passed down through generations, function as a personal altar for prayer and protection in Zoroastrian homes.

Singaporewala reimagines the ritual components of the ses as towering structures reminiscent of obelisks and minarets. While the ses in his family grew smaller over generations, this work inverts that process. Inspired by childhood memories and a moment of personal transition, the sculptures invite physical exploration and reflection, transforming domestic ritual into architectural play. The installation's title, *Lighthouses*, alludes to symbols of guidance and return. Like beacons, they offer a way to return, to locate oneself in space and time. These works sustain continuity through transformation, allowing ancestral memory to unfold into the present through expanded scale, colour and affect.



No.5

Sense of Ses (colour) 2025

Size: Various

Medium: Printed PLA

Edition of 50



No.6

Sense of Ses (chrome) 2025

Size: Various

Medium: Chrome plated PLA

Edition of 10



No.7

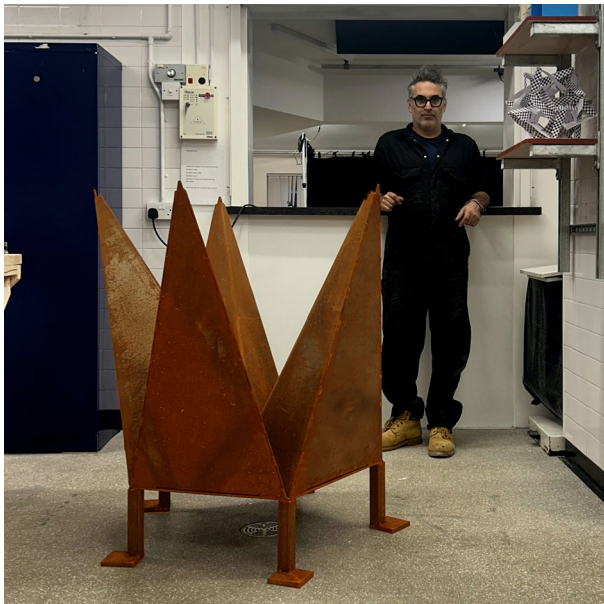
Keki rising 2025

Photograph by Judith Jones RWA

Size: 800x1020mm

Medium: Durospect with C-Type photograph

Edition of 12



No.8

Fire Worshipper 2025

with Cake Industries

Size: 1000x1000x1200mm

Medium: Lasercut weathered steel



No.9

Follow me, follow me 2025

Size: 2100x2100x2100mm

Medium: Painted PVC and steel

Follow me, follow me is a star-shaped sculpture composed of interlocking geometric forms, designed to be navigated on foot and studied from multiple angles. Drawing from Singporewala's early interest in astrophysics, the work explores mathematical structures, cosmic order and the unseen forces that influence human lives. Its form, based on the stellation of an icosahedron, draws from geometries associated with celestial mapping and symbolic orientation. The sculpture reflects on gravity, both literal and relational. Just as planetary bodies are bound through invisible forces, so too are people guided by those around them. Family, mentors and inherited traditions exert a gravitational pull, shaping personal trajectories across time. The star becomes a spatial manifestation of that influence.

While the structure emerges from abstract systems, the title invites reflection on direction and trust. Beneath the formal structure lies a deeper narrative of cultural inheritance rooted in childhood memory. At Catholic school, Singporewala learned that the Three Kings in the nativity story of Christ were believed to be Magi, astronomer-priests who followed a directional star. Learning that the Magi were thought to be Zoroastrian allowed him to reinsert his heritage into a dominant cultural narrative. The star, once traced by the Magi, remains suspended as an open invitation to all who seek their place in the world.



No.10

Dial M for Monument 2012

Size: 270x270x450mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 20

*Edition displayed courtesy of the Richard Duncalf OBE JP
and Oscar Pinto-Hervia OBE collection*



No.11

Jamnitzer's Corporum 2022

Size: 330x330x620mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 5



No.12

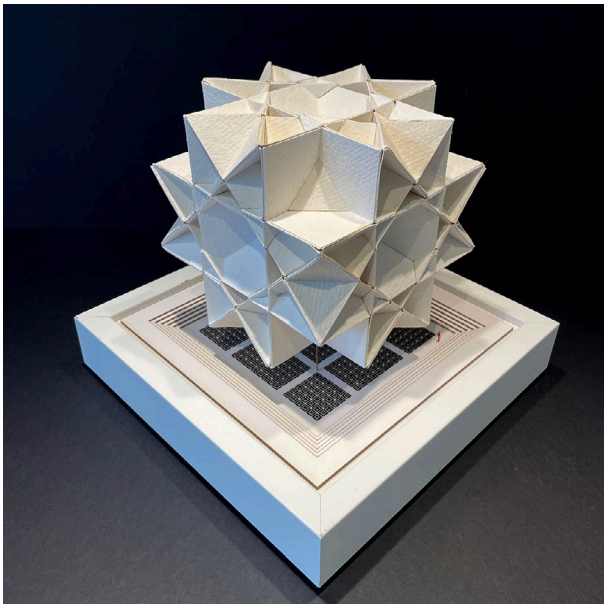
Ready Fusion 2024

Size: 160x160x350mm

Medium: Printed PLA and carbon fibre

Edition of 20

Edition displayed courtesy of the Fiona Robinson collection



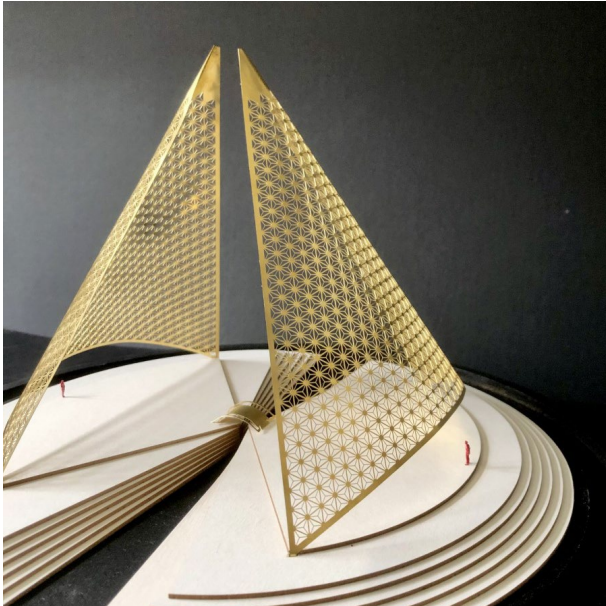
No.13

Civic Rhombicuboctahedron Study IV 2022

Size: 250x250x250mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 20



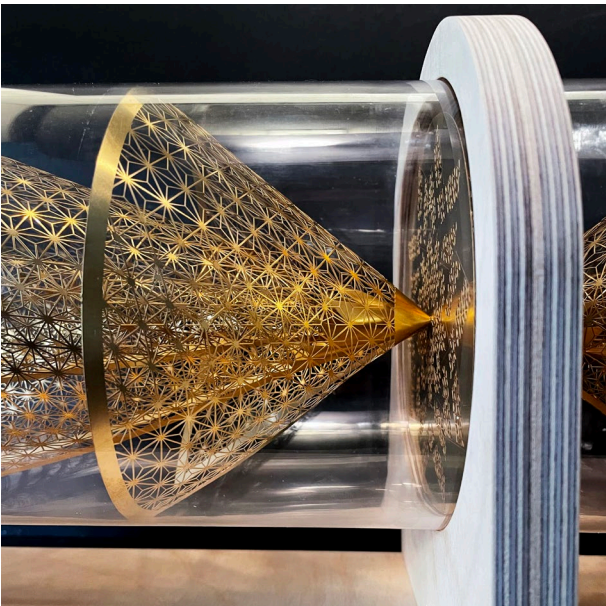
No.14

Doppel Communion 2020

Size: 340x340x360mm

Medium: Photo-etched brass

Edition of 10



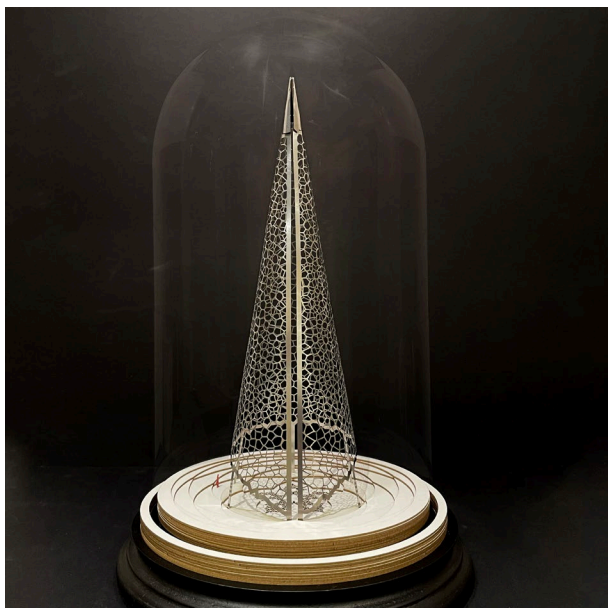
No.15

Connubial Collider 2022

Size: 620x180x120mm

Medium: Photo-etched brass

Edition of 5



No.16

Stinkhorn Soparo 2022

Size: 270x270x450mm

Medium: Photo-etched stainless steel

Edition of 20

Edition displayed courtesy of the Royal West of England Academy collection



No.17

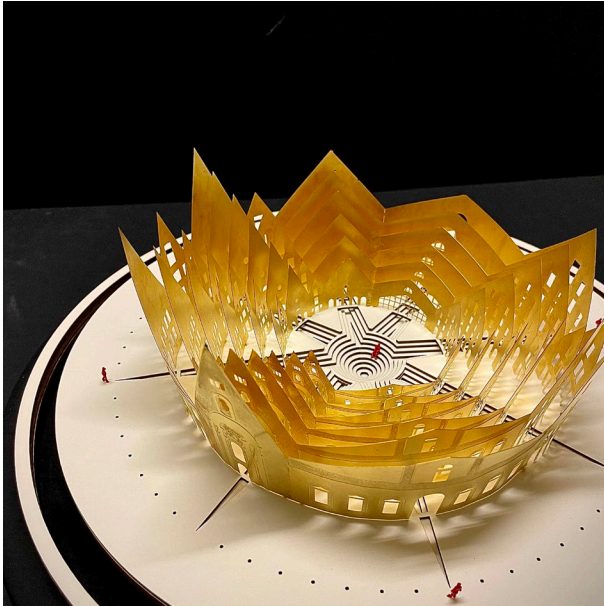
The bus scenario 2017

Size: 150x150x270mm

Medium: Photo-etched brass

Edition of 20

Edition displayed courtesy of the Roberts family collection.



No.18

The city is yours 2023

Size: 340x340x280mm

Medium: Photo-etched brass

Edition of 4



No.19

Sun and mountain (after Denny) 2024

Size: 390x500mm

Medium: Photo-etched stainless steel, brass and phosphor bronze

Edition of 20



No.20

Lilibet's legacy 2017

Size: 150x150x150mm

Medium: Steel with cubic diamonds on antique plaster mannequin

Art work displayed courtesy of Fi and Guy Granger collection.



No.21

Crown of prayers 2025 with Sophie Merriner

Size: 200x230x450mm

Medium: Aluminium and cloth on mannequin



No.22

40 under 40 2023

Size: 100x100x230mm

Medium: Glass and marble

Art work displayed courtesy of the Jacquelyn Jubert and Joseph Robson collection.



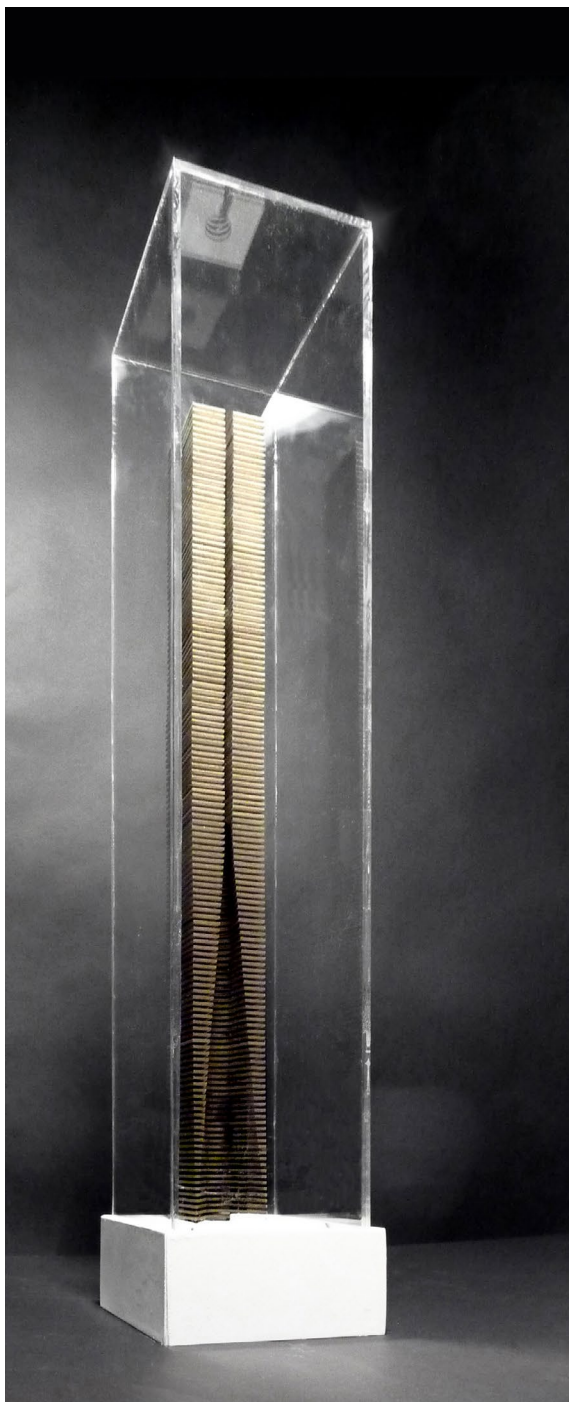
No.23

Palmyra unbuilt 2016

Size: 340x190x450mm

Medium: Enamelled plastic figures

Edition of 15



No.24

The last tower of silence 2011

Size: 140x180x850mm

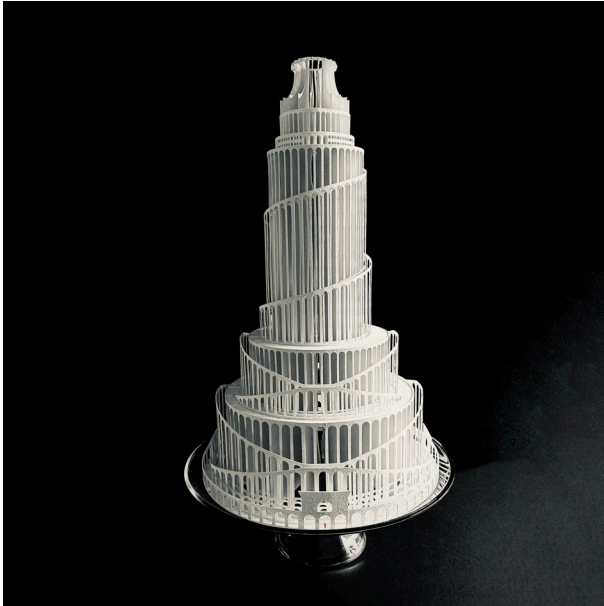
Medium: Lasercut cardboard and wood

Edition of 20

Edition displayed courtesy of the Francoise and Martin Shenfield collection.

A Tower of Silence, or *dakhma*, is a traditional Zoroastrian funerary structure used for the disposal of the dead. In accordance with Zoroastrian spiritual practice, bodies are exposed to vultures and other scavengers to prevent the contamination of sacred elements such as earth and fire. However, Singporewala's *The last tower of silence* departs from the traditional circular form of the *dakhma*. Instead, it assumes the vertical silhouette of a modern skyscraper, reflecting the artist's architectural training and concurrent engagement with high-rise design. Skyscrapers, being ubiquitous markers of modernity and global capitalism are visual signifiers of an urban landscape deeply shaped by colonial histories and Western architectural ideals.

By evoking Zoroastrian funerary form through the scale and overbearing presence of a contemporary tower, Singporewala constructs a powerful metaphor for the complexities of diasporic life, or the dispersion of people from their original homeland. Created during the period in which the artist chose to baptise his first child, the piece becomes a quiet yet resonant meditation on faith, heritage and rupture. The funerary connotations transform into a speculative memorial, not for the dead but for traditions and ancestral practices that risk being obscured or lost in hybridised, multicultural contexts such as London. The hollow lower levels of the tower represent inherited foundations while the vertical unfolding suggests a search for new configurations. As such, the tower operates simultaneously as an architectural and emotive structure, holding space for memory, identity and the unresolved tensions of cultural continuity and change.



No.25

Turris Babel 2025

Size: 330x330x660mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag



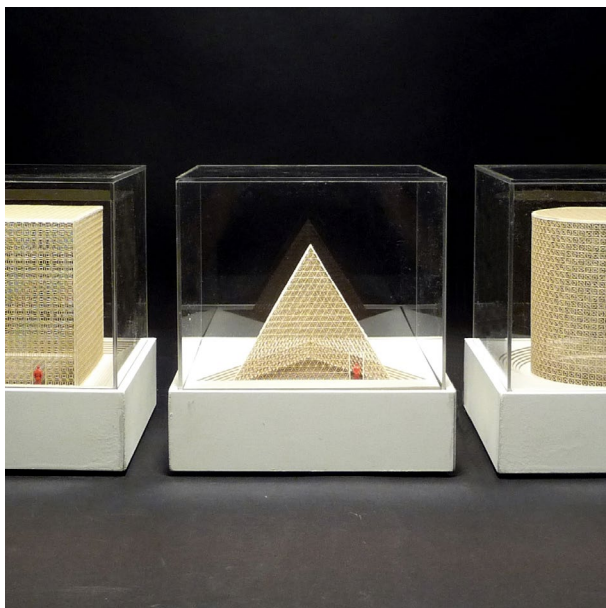
No.26

We will never speak the same language 2025

Size: 210x210mm

Medium: Blind emboss print

Edition of 100



No.27

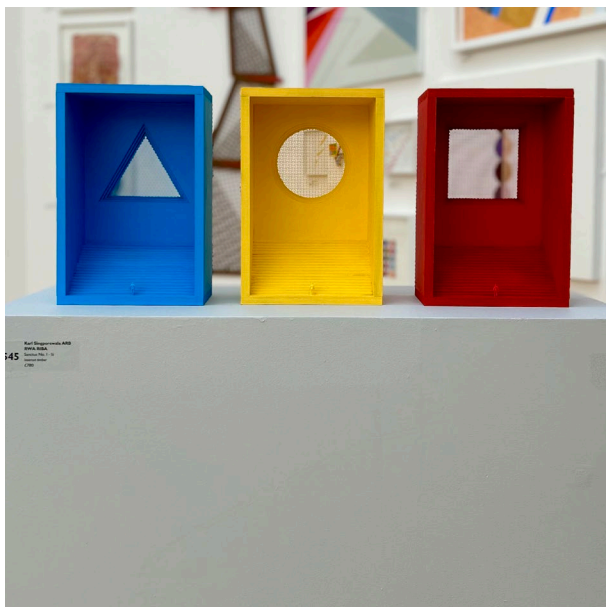
Joseph's Leonarvilions 2011

Size: 210x210x250mm (each)

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 25

Edition displayed courtesy of the Jacqueline M Pitfield collection.



No.28

Sanctus No.I, II, III 2024

Size: 150x150x270mm

Medium: Lasercut timber

Edition of 20



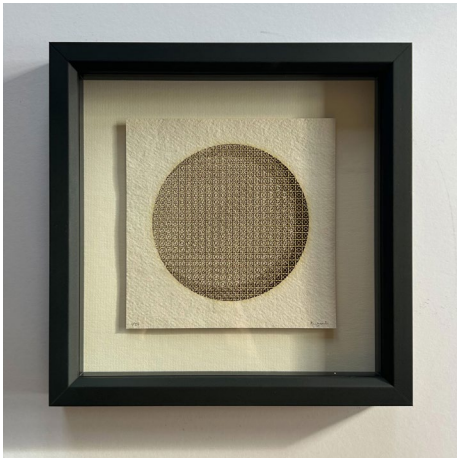
No.29

JL Diagrid Elevation 2025

Size: 250x250mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 50



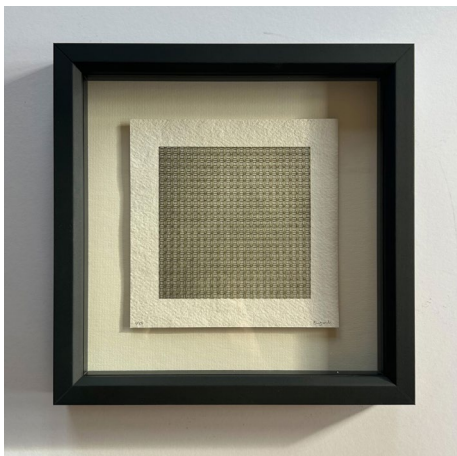
No.30

JL Novus Elevation 2025

Size: 250x250mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 50



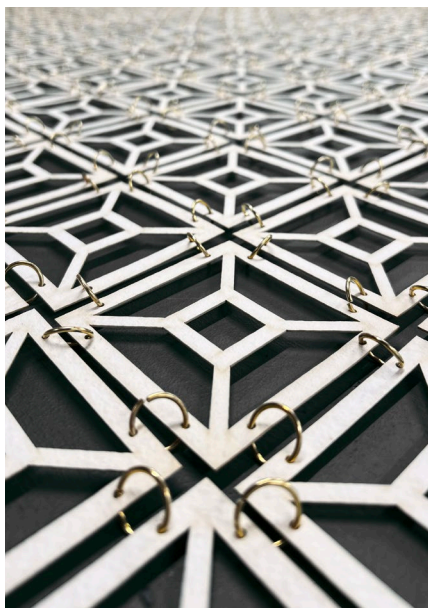
No.31

JL Tesseract Elevation 2025

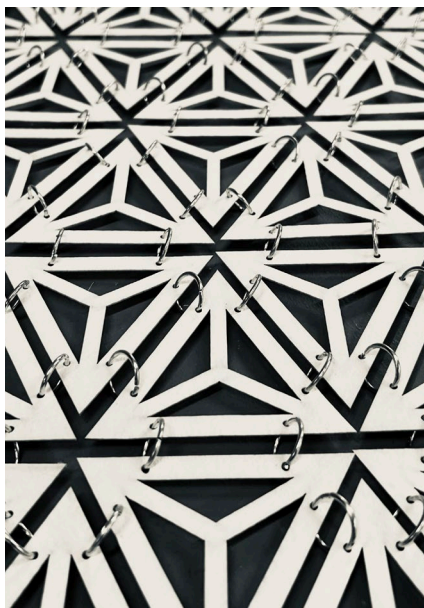
Size: 250x250mm

Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

Edition of 50



No.32
Thoughts 2025



No.33
Words 2025



No.34
Deeds 2025

Size: 2000x2000mm each
Medium: Lasercut Indian handmade cotton rag

The titles of these three works reference a core tenet of Zoroastrianism: '*Humata, Hūkhta, Huvaršta*' meaning 'Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds.' This guiding principle, instilled in Singporewala by his parents, is one he now tries to pass on to his own children. The square, triangle and circle seen in the three artworks are universal archetypes that resonate across cultures and time. While these shapes have a variety of cosmic associations and architectural histories, including appearances in churches and sacred structures across London, their presence here is also rooted in the domestic and intimate.

Inspired by children's toys scattered across his home, these artworks invoke both the moral compass of Zoroastrian tradition, but also the generative force of play. Like much of Singporewala's practice, these three artworks pay homage to the role of parents in transmitting and transforming traditions while adapting them for each generation. Through these familiar yet multivalent forms, Singporewala explores parenthood, gratitude, repetition and continuity as a meditation on the ideals we inherit and those we choose to pass on.

Singporewala Ses 1952-2023

Four family ses, each from a different generation

Among Zoroastrians in India, the *ses* is regarded as one of the most auspicious ritual symbols. It is a metallic tray, made in various shapes and sizes, typically from stainless steel, EPNS (German silver) or pure silver. The tray and its accompanying vessels may be simple in design or elaborately decorate, but regardless of style, the *ses* is considered an essential feature of every Parsi household. It is also used during key Zoroastrian ceremonies such as the *Navjote* (initiation of a child into the faith), *Jashan* (thanksgiving ritual), *Nowruz* (New Year's celebrations) and wedding rites. While the contents of the tray vary according to occasion, four symbolic items are considered indispensable: the *sopāro*, *piḡāni*, *divo* and *gulābdān*.

Sopāro

The *sopāro* holds a central place in the *ses*. It is a tall, sometimes perforated, conical metal vessel designed to hold either rock sugar lumps (*khadi sakar*) or sugar discs (*patasha*), though in practice it is often left empty. Its importance is primarily symbolic, representing the allegorical Mount Hara, mountain of sweetness, from which good spirits are believed to descend. The *sopāro* may have been inspired by the Iranian *kalleh ghand*—rock sugar cones traditionally wrapped in green or gold-embellished foil.



Pigāni

The *pigāni* is a small, lidded vessel used to hold *kanku* (vermilion powder), which is applied as a mark of blessing on the forehead. The mark, or *tikā*, is regarded as a symbol of happiness. Traditionally, Parsi men receive a vertical stroke, representing the radiance of the sun—an emblem of vitality and generosity—while women are given a round mark, reflecting the moon, beauty, and receptivity



Dīvo

The *dīvo* (oil lamp) represents the sacred element of fire, symbolising wisdom and the divine illumination of Ahura Mazda. Lighting the lamp is an invocation of purity, divine wisdom and spiritual illumination. Its flame is believed to ward off evil forces, while inviting benevolent energies and blessings into the home.

Gulābdān

The *gulābāz* or *gulābdān* is a metal container fitted with a sprinkler for rose water (*gulāb-jal*). It symbolises happiness and hospitality. In Iran, it was customary to sprinkle rose water on arriving guests while offering the greeting *khush āmadid* (“welcome”).



Zarathustra portrait

Object courtesy of Persis and Keki Singporewala

Visual representations of the prophet Zarathustra are widespread within the Zoroastrian community. His image is prominently displayed in fire temples and homes, featured in printed editions of *Khordeh Avestas*, children's literature and on countless Zoroastrian and Parsi-themed websites. Among Parsis, the image has become so beloved that some devout individuals now incorporate the image into their religious practices—adorning it with floral garlands and applying a *rākhyā* (mark) of sandalwood ash to its forehead. The devotional attachment to these images has grown so intense that some Parsis enthusiastically kiss the prophet's image.

Despite this widespread reverence, it is noteworthy that the now-common depiction of Zarathustra is a relatively recent innovation in Zoroastrian tradition. The oldest known portrayal of Zarathustra by a Zoroastrian artist can be found in a 17th-century manuscript (MS HP 149 held in the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute) of the Persian *Zarātushnāma* ("The Book of Zarathustra"). Since then, numerous illustrations of the prophet with different styles originated from various manuscripts, i.e. *Ardāvīrāfnāma*. However, it was the Sasanian rock-relief at Taq-i Bustan in Kermanshah province of Iran that became the most influential source for the later Zarathustra images. Early European visitors to the site mistakenly identified one of the figures in the relief as a depiction of the prophet. Though scholars now generally agree that the scene shows the divine investiture of King Shapur II (r. 309—379 CE), flanked by the deities Ohrmazd and Mithra at the moment of his victory over the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate.

The English traveller Robert Ker Porter, who journeyed through Iran between 1818 and 1820, was the first to publish a reproduction of the Taq-i Bustan relief. In his 1822 travelogue, he speculated that the figure depicted with a radiant nimbus encircling the head might represent "the glorified Zoroaster himself". This idea was echoed by John Malcolm, later the Governor of Bombay, who in the second edition of his *History of Persia* (1829) referred to the sculpture as "the prophet Zoroaster". Malcolm, who had ties to the Bombay Parsi community, played a pivotal role in introducing this image to Parsis in India and encouraging the belief that the figure in the relief was indeed Zarathustra.



As more images from ancient Iranian monuments made their way to India, the Parsi community rapidly adopted these images as sacred symbols. Parsi travellers to Iran continued to identify the nimbate figure at Taq-i Bustan with the prophet. Among them was Kavasjee Dinshaw Kias, who, in his 1889 publication *Ancient Persian Sculptures*, recreated the relief with restored facial features and presented the image as Zarathustra. This period coincided with the Parsis' growing engagement with print industry, during which lithographs and stamped images inspired by Ker Porter's drawing of the rock relief began to appear on the covers and title pages of religious books. .

The advent of chromolithography—an innovative technique for producing colour prints—further popularized these images. By the 1880s, colour portraits of Zarathustra had begun to circulate widely, not only in books but also as standalone prints displayed in homes and fire temples. By the early 20th century, such portraits had become common among Zoroastrians in both India and Iran. While many artists stayed true to the established visual formula, some introduced their own stylistic interpretations, contributing to the evolving iconography of the prophet.



Ardā Vīrāf Nāma

Object courtesy of Zar Amrolia

This richly illustrated manuscript is a Gujarati translation of the Middle Persian Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag, one of the most significant and visionary texts of Zoroastrianism, probably composed between the 9th and 10th centuries CE. It contains 96 vivid illustrations that accompany the narrative, bringing to life the spiritual journey of the priest Ardā Vīrāf through the realms of heaven and hell.

The manuscript opens with a Persian line invoking Ohrmazd “In the name of the merciful, compassionate and just Creator Ohrmazd, this illustrated Hindu Ardā Vīrāf-nāma has begun.” This introductory phrase frames the work in devotional reverence while highlighting its cross-cultural transmission into Gujarati.

Following the account of Ardā Vīrāf, this manuscript also contains an illustrated retelling of the story of Sultan Mahmud in Gujarati. The only other known illustrated version of this tale is preserved in the National Museum, Delhi, where it appears in Persian.

The Book of Ardā Vīrāf is a report of the soul journey of “Vīrāf the Just” who places himself into a seven-day sleep to dispel doubts about religion, resurrection, heaven and hell. Chosen for his virtue from among the entire community gathered at the fire temple of Ādur Farnbag, Vīrāf was required to consume a narcotic drink to begin his journey. For seven days and nights, he lay unconscious while his seven sisters and others watched over him, praying and reciting the Zoroastrian liturgical texts.

During this visionary experience, he witnesses the rewards of the righteous in heaven and the punishments of the wicked in hell. Accompanied by the righteous Srōsh and Adūr he travels to the Činwad Puhl, a bridge that leads from this world to the next and must be crossed by the souls of the departed. Upon awakening, he recounts everything he has seen. His journey forms a foundational narrative in Zoroastrian eschatology, offering a 9th century view on moral guidance and warning to the faithful.



Fire Worshipper Woman 1895

Reproduction courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London

This photograph, attributed to the Tehran studio of Antoin Sevruguin (c.1830–1933), portrays a Zoroastrian woman from Kerman (Kirman) standing on patterned carpets, dressed in layered garments with a headdress adorned with coins. Her posture is relaxed, her gaze direct yet faintly smiling. The backdrop suggests hints of foliage, lending the image an intimacy that contrasts with its sensationalist caption: *Fire Worshipper Woman*.

The caption reflects the language and attitudes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Zoroastrians were often described by outsiders through reductive and archaic epithets. The term *fire worshipper* misrepresents Zoroastrian theology. Fire (*ātash*) is not worshipped as a deity but revered as a symbol of divine truth and purity. It also holds an essential role as a ritual implement (*ālāt*) used in liturgical practice. Such terminology catered to a European audience primed for the exotic, positioning the subject as a representative of a “vanishing” or “mysterious” faith.

As with other photographs in the C. R. Smith album collection at the V&A, this image was likely a stock photograph purchased from Sevruguin’s commercial catalogue which frequently included portraits, costume studies and architectural views. Portraits of women in ethnographic dress were popular among foreign buyers, combining anthropological curiosity with the visual appeal of textile and jewellery detail. The carpets beneath her feet may also have been a deliberate inclusion, underscoring Kerman’s renown for carpet weaving, a detail that would resonate with Smith’s professional interest in Persian carpets.

Viewed today, the photograph invites a more nuanced reading. Beyond its historic framing and title, it preserves a record of personal presence: a woman rooted in her community, momentarily pausing for the photographer’s lens. Reconsidering her not as an emblem of an “exotic faith” but as an individual restores her agency within this frame and reminds us of the limits of Orientalist labelling.



Tower of Death 1895

Reproduction courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London

This photograph, taken in Iran and attributed to the commercial studio of Antoin Sevruguin (c.1830–1933), depicts a Zoroastrian *dakhma*—known in English as a “Tower of Silence.” In Zoroastrian tradition these elevated circular structures served as sites for sky burial, the ritual exposure of the dead to carrion birds, thereby ensuring that natural elements were protected from defilement by the corpse.

Yet in the C. R. Smith album, as in many travel photographs and accounts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the site is labelled “Tower of Death (Fire Worshippers).” Such terminology was not incidental. Western travellers, missionaries and publishers frequently employed sensationalist or morbid titles when presenting unfamiliar customs to European audiences. This reflected an orientalist tendency to emphasise what was perceived as “exotic” or “macabre” rather than engage with the spiritual and theological meanings of non-Western rituals.

In travel literature from Persia and British India the phrase “Tower of Death” appears repeatedly, often accompanied by disparaging descriptions of Zoroastrian rites. Illustrated magazines and postcard captions similarly favoured dramatic language, reinforced by the commercial imperative to market images to a public fascinated by the strange and the morbid. Through this process, *dakhmas* were reframed not as sacred sites of transition but as ominous monuments to death.

The term “Tower of Silence”—a translation that gained currency in the later nineteenth century—offered a more accurate and respectful rendering, one that aligned more closely with Zoroastrian understandings of dignity, purity and cosmic order. Reinstating this name is more than a linguistic correction. It is an act of cultural accuracy, countering a historic lens that reduced complex religious practices to spectacle.

The Adoration of the Magi

Reproduction courtesy of Opera di Religione della Diocesi di Ravenna

“The Three Magi” of Ravenna is a wall mosaic representing an artistic masterpiece of the Byzantine period in Italy. Though the identity of the artist remains unknown, they are commonly referred to as the “Master of Sant’Apollinare”, named after the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, where the mosaic is located. This basilica was built and decorated at the behest of King Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who governed Italy in the late 5th to early 6th century, officially as a representative of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperor in Constantinople. Originally constructed as an Arian church dedicated to Christ the Savior, the basilica was later converted into a Catholic place of worship after Ravenna came under Byzantine control during the reign of Emperor Justinian.

This mosaic, depicting the Gospel episode of the Adoration of the Magi—which symbolises the universality of the Christian message—is part of a larger cycle of mosaics that cover the walls of the central nave of the basilica. Specifically, it is located on the right wall, within a long scene depicting a procession of virgins.

The Magi, or Wise Men lead the procession, guided by an eight-pointed star, as they move towards the Madonna and Child, who are enthroned and flanked by two pairs of angels. The Magi are depicted wearing colourful and ornate Persian-style garments: anaxyrides (trousers), kitons (short tunics), chlamys (cloaks), and Phrygian caps. Their names—Balthassar, Melchior and Gaspar—are inscribed above them, each preceded by the abbreviation SCS (Sanctus, meaning ‘saint’). The three Magi represent different stages of life: the eldest, depicted with a gray beard, leads the group; the youngest, clean-shaven, follows; and the middle-aged Magus, with a dark beard, comes last. Each carries a symbolic gift: Gaspar presents gold, signifying Christ’s sovereignty; Balthassar offers frankincense symbolizing his divine nature and priestly role; and Melchior brings myrrh, traditionally used in embalming processes, symbolises death and mortality.

Over the centuries, the mosaic has suffered damage, particularly to the upper portions of the figures. A 1690s



drawing by Giovanni Ciampini documents an earlier restoration in which the heads of the Magi were reconstructed with crowns, reflecting the period’s interpretation of the Wise Men as kings. This restoration aligned with contemporary artistic and theological preferences. However, in later restorations carried out toward the end of the century, these crowns were removed in an effort to return the figures to a form closer to their original appearance.

The term ‘magi’ (*magu-* in Old Persian, *μᾶγοι* in Greek) has been attested since Achaemenid times, referring to the hereditary priestly class of the Zoroastrian religion. During the Achaemenid and the Parthian (Arsacid) period—contemporary with the birth of Jesus—the Magi served as the official priests of the Persian kings, performing rituals like sacrifices, libations and fire worship. They held administrative roles, managed temple offerings, and were present across the empire. Their role reached its peak under the Sasanian period, when they held religious and governmental roles, wielding considerable cultural and political influence.



Ancient Persian Empire 1831

Courtesy of SOAS Library, University of London

Drawn and engraved by John Dower and published in London by Henry Teesdale & Co, 1831 (Ref. MCA/01/02/01/09)

This finely engraved map of the Ancient Persian Empire was produced in 1831 by the accomplished cartographer and engraver John Dower and issued by the London map publisher Henry Teesdale & Co. The map reflects the early nineteenth century's growing scholarly and public interest in the ancient Near East, situating Persia within both classical geography and the emerging field of historical cartography.

John Dower (fl. 1830—1847), celebrated for the precision and clarity of his linework, brought to this map his hallmark attention to detail, combining classical sources with contemporary geographic knowledge. Henry Teesdale (1776—1856), one of London's leading publishers of atlases in the first half of the nineteenth century, was instrumental in making high-quality maps accessible to a wider audience. Through works such as the *New General Atlas of the World* (1831), in which this map appeared, Teesdale and Dower contributed significantly to the visualisation of both modern and ancient geographies.

Within the history of Persian mapping, this map is notable for the way it translates the grandeur of the Achaemenid Empire into nineteenth-century cartographic conventions. By engraving the extent of Persian dominion across Asia, the Near East and parts of Europe, the map not only illustrates the territorial scope of one of antiquity's most influential empires but also exemplifies how nineteenth-century British cartography engaged with the cultural and political legacies of Persia.

Now held in the collections of SOAS Library, this map embodies both the artistry of early Victorian mapmaking and the intellectual fascination with Persia's imperial past that shaped British scholarship and publishing in the nineteenth century.

Cyrus Cylinder 539 BC

Cast by the British Museum, courtesy of Farrokh K. Kavarana (acc. no. 90920)

The Cyrus Cylinder is a barrel-shaped piece of baked clay inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform script. It was crafted through a multi-stage process. Initially, a cone-shaped core with large grey stone inclusions was formed. Next, layers of clay were added to build up a cylindrical shape. In the final stage, a fine clay coating was applied to the surface, creating a smooth base for the inscription.

The Cylinder was discovered in a foundation deposit by the Assyrian-British archaeologist Hormoz Rassam on behalf of the British Museum during his excavations at the site of the Marduk temple in Babylon now in modern Iraq in 1879. It is currently hosted in the Ancient Iran Gallery at the British Museum.

The main body of the Cylinder, containing thirty-five lines, was discovered by Rassam's team, but this small fragment with 10 lines was later acquired by Yale University from an antiquities dealer. It was apparently broken off the main body of the Cylinder during the original excavations in 1879 and was either removed from the excavations or was retrieved from one of Rassam's waste dumps.

The Cylinder was created as a foundation deposit following the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE, when Cyrus the Great overthrew the Neo-Babylonian Empire and incorporated it into the Achaemenid Empire. The inscription states that Nabonidus, the last King of Babylon (555—539 BCE), had perverted the cults of the Babylonian gods, including Marduk, the city-god of Babylon and had imposed labour-service on its free population, who complained to the gods. The text then follows an account of Marduk's search for a righteous king to restore the old ways. He chose Cyrus, King of Anshan (Persia) and declared him king of the world. First Cyrus expanded his kingship over the tribes of Iran, ruling them justly. Then Marduk ordered Cyrus to march on Babylon, which he entered without a fight. Nabonidus was delivered into his hands and the people of Babylon happily accepted the kingship of Cyrus. From this point on, the Cylinder speaks in the voice of Cyrus himself: 'I, Cyrus, king



of the world...'. He begins with detailing his royal titles and genealogy and his peaceful entry to Babylon, for which he and his son Cambyses have received the blessing of Marduk. Cyrus presents himself as a worshipper of Marduk who strove for peace in Babylon and abolished the labour-service of its population. He also claims that people from surrounding regions brought tribute and that he restored temples and religious cults neglected under Nabonidus. Notably, he returned the exiled people to their homeland from Babylon. The text concludes with a note about food offerings in the temples of Babylon and the rebuilding of Imgur-Enlil and the city wall of Babylon.

The Cyrus Cylinder was not created in a vacuum; it was part of a long-standing Mesopotamian tradition of royal inscriptions. For centuries before Cyrus the Great, rulers in Mesopotamia (like the Assyrians and Babylonians) had issued clay cylinders to record their achievements, divine favour, building projects, or proclamations. These texts often emphasized the ruler's legitimacy, piety and justice—just like the Cyrus Cylinder does. The tradition represented by the Cyrus Cylinder was not entirely lost. Following the establishment of Seleucid rule over Babylonia after Alexander the Great, Antiochus I (r. 281—261 BCE) commissioned an inscription on a similar barrel-shaped clay cylinder. This inscription follows the format of earlier Babylonian models, featuring two parallel columns and using an archaic style of writing. It commemorates the restoration of the Ezida, the temple of the god Nabu in Borsippa, near Babylon. Like the Cyrus Cylinder, it includes prayers for blessings that link the king with his son and heir. This cylinder from Antiochus is the most recent known example of this type of document.

Darius I Seal 5th Century BC

Cast courtesy of the British Museum (acc. no. 89132)

This cylinder seal is carved into streaked, green to grey-brown chalcedony (or prase). It is 1.7 cm in diameter, 3.7 cm in height and weighs 21 gr. The seal stone is currently hosted in the Ancient Iran Gallery at the British Museum (accession no. 89132).

The seal depicts Achaemenid King Darius I the Great (518—486 BCE) in a chariot, facing right with a frontal torso. He wears a four-pointed dentate crown, formal robe and sports a pointed, striated beard. His hair is styled in a pageboy cut. With free hands, he aims a bow ending in a bird-head, sleeves folded back for ease of movement.

The charioteer stands before the king, leaning forward to steer two horses. He has a striated beard, shoulder-length hair, a diadem with a central boss and a double-bordered cape. The two-wheeled chariot has crossed side panels, a rear looped support, front notched brace, eight-spoked wheel and a pole connecting to the yoke.

Two double-headed horses (one body) gallop with bent forelegs, tasselled harnesses, visible penis and a knotted tail. The king shoots two arrows into the eye and right forepaw of a snarling, rampant lion with a cross-hatched mane. Under the feet of the horses lies a likely dead lion with three arrows projecting from shoulder. All animals show defined musculature, with drill-holes marking eyes, paws and limbs. Above the scene hovers a winged sun-disc with the upper body of a male figure (representation of Fravahar, a prominent symbol in Zoroastrianism). He has a striated beard, spiked crown and a robe with long sleeves; one hand is raised, the other holds a ring. The wings are sectioned and lined, with scroll-like appendages and a vertically lined, curved tail.

Flanking the scene are two identical palm trees with globular bunches of fruit beneath the palm fronds on each side and base petioles shown by a continuous criss-cross pattern down the trunks ending in widened bases. The whole is placed on a ground line. To the side is a three-line vertical inscription panel.



The seal bears a trilingual cuneiform inscription in Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian. It reads as follows: I [am] Darius, the Great King. However, the word 'Great' occurs only in the Babylonian script.

The provenance of this seal is uncertain, it is said to have been found in a tomb near Thebes, Lower Egypt, but the recent discovery of a very similar seal impression at Persepolis suggests that it may in fact come from one of the Persian royal capitals. There is no concrete reason to think that this was Darius' personal seal, since royal name seals were also used by officials at lower levels of the royal administration, as shown by extensive use of name seals of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I at Daskyleion in western Anatolia.



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