The Kamran Djam Annual Lectures
Centre for Iranian Studies,
SOAS, University of London

Nizâmî : Mirror of the Unseen World
Nizâmî’s Brides of the Seven Climes

Lectures by Michael Barry
Princeton University
Monday 2 and Tuesday 3 February 2015
Kamran Djam Annual Lecture Series at SOAS

In 2011 SOAS was awarded a gift of £2 million by the Fereydoun Djam Charitable Trust to promote Iranian studies. This generous endowment enables SOAS to build on its long and distinguished tradition of study into one of the world’s oldest and richest cultures. As part of this initiative, SOAS has introduced new scholarships in Iranian studies as well as an annual lecture series to promote diverse aspects of Iranian studies. The annual lectures are hosted by the Centre for Iranian Studies at SOAS and are named after Fereydoun’s son, Kamran Djam, who predeceased his parents in 1989.

We are delighted to announce the third in this series of lectures which will be given by Dr Michael Barry.

Dr Michael Barry was born in 1948 in New York City but raised in France with long stays in Afghanistan as a guest of Afghan family friends, whence lifelong interest in the languages, literatures, arts and spiritual traditions of Persianate civilization as well as Italian and Iberian cultures—he holds higher degrees in all these subjects from Princeton, Cambridge, McGill (Montreal) and l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) — although he interrupted his academic career to serve as humanitarian coordinator in war-torn Afghanistan for the International Federation for Human Rights, for Médecins du Monde, then for the United Nations, between 1979 and 2002. He now teaches Sufism, Classical Persian Literature, medieval Spanish history, medieval Indo-Iranian history, and modern Afghan history, in Princeton University’s Department of Near Eastern Studies. Dr Barry has published extensively in both his writing languages, English and French, on a wide variety of subjects ranging from fifteenth-century Portuguese travels in the Indian Ocean to a prize-winning essay on Nizâmi to a lauded biography of the Afghan commander Massoud; he holds twelve literary prizes from France, the United States and Iran, as well as a major French award for investigative journalism and a US award for excellence in teaching. His latest publication, ‘Attâr’s Canticle of the Birds, Illustrated Through Persian and Eastern Islamic Art (Diane de Selliers, 2014, with Leili Anvar for the French version of the poem and Dick Davis for the poem’s English rendition), was awarded the highest distinction for art history from the French Académie des Beaux-Arts (part of the Académie Française) in 2013, and Iran’s World Book Award on Persian Civilization in 2014. As Consultative Chairman of the New York Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Islamic Art in 2005-2008, he advised the re-organization of the Museum’s current galleries of arts of the Arab lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Later South Asia.
Monday 2 February: Mirror of the Unseen World

Nizâmî (1141-1209), from Ganjeh in present-day Azerbaijan, ranks with Firdâswî, ʿAttâr and Rûmî among the four most influential and deeply beloved narrative poets in all Classical Persian Literature. Kings in Iran and Central Asia, Turkey and India vied to sponsor production of the most magnificent manuscripts of the poet’s five romances, with illuminations by the civilization’s most talented painters from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. This and the next slideshow examine just how the Timurid, Safavid, Uzbek, Ottoman and Mughal artists rendered scenes and most especially revealed to us symbolic meanings of the master storyteller’s tales from the Haft Paykar (“Brides of the Seven Climes”), further choosing to depict the revered poet himself as the archetypal figure of the Spiritual Initiator or Active Intellect, configured as a venerable Sage: for the poet was indeed once regarded from Istanbul to Delhi as the mystical “Mirror of the Unseen World”, āyineh-ye ghayb - as Nizâmî actually calls himself in the preludes to his Laylî-ô Majnûn.

Nizâmî’s “Brides of the Seven Climes” or Haft Paykar, literally “The Seven Icons”, composed in AD 1197, may be regarded without any doubt as the most sophisticated and psychologically subtle verse romance in Persian literature (as well as one of the most illustrated), and certainly as one of the crowning glories of world literature. Nizâmî takes up here the general theme of the Thousand and One Nights but dazzlingly weaves its tales-within-a-tale around the fierce figure of a doughty Sasanian king and warrior turned into a legendary hero who weds seven wise queens. For the protagonist in Nizâmî’s frame-story is none other than King Bahrâm-i Gôr the Dragonslayer (r. AD 421-439) whose lionlike pride, and dragonlike wrath, are tamed, at last, by the seven tales of spiritual initiation told to this most splendid of Ancient Persian rulers by his seven lovely brides - as it were seven “Sheherazades” - from seven different lands, India, Byzantium, Turkestan, Russia, Morocco, China, and Iran. Each princess sits beneath a dome tinged with the colour of her respective ascendant star: Saturday’s black (Saturn), Sunday’s yellow-gold (the Sun), Monday’s shimmering green (the Moon), Tuesday’s blood-soaked red (Mars), Wednesday’s melancholy turquoise (Mercury), Thursday’s healing sandalwood (Jupiter), and finally Friday’s radiant white (Venus), corresponding to seven moods and spiritual states.

Tuesday 3 February: Brides of the Seven Climes

The tales told by King Bahrâm’s seven brides follow each other in a dizzying succession of enchanted adventures drawing upon Zoroastrian and Manichaean and Indian and even Classical Greek lore - many corresponding to the popular stories of the Thousand and One Nights but fraught here with spiritual meaning enhanced by magnificent Persian poetry - featuring giant birds, lusty harem intrigues, terrible desert journeys, brazen-walled castles defended by armed automatons, goblins and she-vampires, magic trees whose leaves cure blindness and the falling sickness, and lovely Paradise-houris. King Bahrâm enters the first or black dome to hear the first tale of the Lady of India on the first day of winter, proceeds the next day to the golden-yellow dome of the Lady of Byzantium, and so spends what seems like a magic week under each successive dome to listen to each princess’s story, while the ruler himself dons every evening a different coloured robe tinged with the hue of each bride’s star and day.

But the poet, much like Shakespeare, resorts to dramatic “double time.” For King Bahrâm only emerges from his magic garden of the seven domes a full seven years later, on the first day of spring: mysteriously transformed and endowed with universal wisdom by the seven stages of his spiritual instruction, which the poet’s prelude reveals to have been actually an internalized symbolic re-enactment, and meditation, of an imaginary journey through the seven heavenly spheres, as seen by the Prophet Muhammad himself in his visionary ascent: in guidance of all souls. The poet himself reveals why he chose his pen-name, Nizâmî - the numerical value of whose Arabic letters add up precisely to One Thousand and One: “only step within Nizâmî’s name, and find therein One Thousand Names, and One: dar nâm-i Nizâmî gar nihî gâm / bînî ‘adad-i hezâr-ô yek nâm.” No book of tales was more admired by later rulers from Turkey to India who commissioned sumptuous manuscripts thereof, regularly ordering depictions of themselves as the poem’s King Bahrâm.

Cover image from Ten Poems from Hafez. www.jilapeacock.co.uk
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Date
First Lecture: Monday, 2 February 2015
7.00pm preceded by a reception at 6.00pm
Second Lecture: Tuesday, 3 February 2015
7.00pm

Venue
Khalili Lecture Theatre
SOAS, University of London
Russell Square
London WC1H 0XG

Admission
Admission Free - All Welcome

Organised by
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