

The British  
Museum



Lion and Sun Medal from Iran  
19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century  
British Museum M9229

## The Iranian Lion and Sun: a symbol of identity and continuity

3 September – 9 December 2015

**Free**

Objects in Focus

Room 3

Supported by The Altajir Trust





## The Iranian Lion and the Sun: a symbol of identity and continuity

Proposal by Sharareh Farokhnia, Iran

**Object & why:** This elaborate Persian medal, C&M 9229, shows in the centre a lion with the sun on its back, surrounded by sun rays. This Imperial Order of the Lion and the Sun was created by Fat'h Ali Shah of the Qajar Dynasty in 1808 to honour foreign officials for their distinguished services to Persia. This was later extended to Iranian officials. To this day the lion and the sun motif is seen as a symbol of identity and continuity by Iranians at home and abroad.

**Theme:** The importance, popularity and continuation of this unusual motif is shown on medals, coins, tiles, banknotes and other small objects in Iran.

The lion and sun also appears in other cultures, but in Iran it has a special significance. In the ancient Near East, the lion and the sun were symbols of kingship and divine power. Iranian mythology regards the lion (Persian *shir*) as the king of animals, a symbol of power and kingship. The sun (Persian *khoshid*) was associated with Mithra, the ancient Iranian god of light, sun, seasons, pact and contract.

Under the Shi'i Safavids (1501-1728) the lion became associated with Imam 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. Imam 'Ali's courage and bravery are compared with a lion and his various names and titles include 'the lion of God'.

**Display:** I will use the medal as the main object and also show some related objects and pictures to stress the importance of this symbol on other material.

As the medal is only 90mm wide, I have chosen other objects and a series of photographs to show this design on various other objects.

**Conservation:** There is no risk of displaying these objects, but they will have to be checked by the Conservation Department before they go on display in Room 3.

**Audience:** This exhibition would be aimed at the general audience, since the image of the human-looking Iranian lion and sun is attractive and unusual. In addition, it will have a special attraction for Iranians and other Middle Eastern people.

**Merchandising:** The symbol can be used for postcards, jewellery (e.g. brooches and earrings), scarves, ties, mugs and T-shirts.

**Events and programmes:** Reading stories of the Iranian Epic of the *Shahnameh* or Book of Kings, storytelling (Persian *naghali*), reading other relevant Persian poems, children's workshop for drawing and designing the symbol of the lion and the sun. Public lecture about the Qajar lion and the sun; Study Day about the lion and the sun in Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

**Proposal:** Exhibition first in the BM (Room 3), then in Tehran at the Golestan Palace Museum.

گر شیر نشان دولت جاوید است    خورشید به پشت اوست هر کس دیده‌ست

*The lion is the symbol of the eternal state    As all can see that the sun is fully behind him.*

Malek o'l Sho'ara Bahar  
(Iranian poet, 1884-1951)

## The lion and the sun

In the ancient Near East, the lion and the sun were symbols of kingship and divine power. Iranian mythology regards the lion (Persian 'shir') as the king of animals, a symbol of power and kingship. The sun (Persian 'khorshid') was associated with Mithra, the ancient Iranian god of light, sun, seasons, pact and contract.

The lion was indigenous to southwestern Iran until the beginning of the 20th century. It features strongly in the art of the Achaemenid period (c. 550-330 BC). Stone reliefs from the ancient site of Persepolis near Shiraz often show the lion in combat with heroes and animals. In the 'Shahnameh' or Book of Kings, the lion is associated with a number of Iranian heroes, including Rostam whose strength is compared with that of a lion and the Sasanian king Bahram V (AD 420-438) who rescues his crown from two lions.

Under the Shi'i Safavids (1501-1728) the lion became associated with Imam 'Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. Imam 'Ali's courage and bravery are compared with a lion and his various names and titles include 'the lion of God'.

The lion and the sun motif, Persian 'shir o khorshid', became the official emblem of Iran from the 1780s until 1980. During this period, medals with the motif of the sun on the back of the lion were presented by the Shahs of Iran to officials.



Silver plate showing the Sasanian King of kings Bahram V (AD 420-438) hunting lions.  
The globe in the royal crown represents the sun as the protector of the kingdom.  
BM 124092

©Trustees of the British Museum