"OPEN SESAME"

The Story of Persian Locks
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Sara Otto-Diniz
Denise Schmandt-Besserat
Illustrations by Bonnie Jewel-Froman

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The University of Texas at Austin

A catalog for the exhibit "Islamic Persian Locks"—the presentation of the people of Iran to the people of the United States on the occasion of the Bicentennial—circulated by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.
This catalog is one of a series prepared for children by The University of Texas Art Museum. It was prepared by two students of the Art Department under the supervision of two faculty members. A graduate student of art history wrote the text and a student of studio art drew the illustrations.

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Sesame!

Do you know the story of Ali Baba who opened the lock to fabulous treasures by saying the magic word “Sesame”? The same just happened to you, and as you read the word “Sesame” on the title page, you magically opened the lock to the book. Now you can turn all the pages and find out about the magnificent locks from Iran.
A Bicentennial birthday gift:

Birthdays are special occasions to honor friends. The birthdays of nations are also celebrated. The United States had its 200th birthday in 1976 and there were fireworks and parades to mark the event. Friendly countries offered birthday gifts. For instance, the Emperor of Iran, called the “Shahanshah” (King of Kings), the Empress, called the “Shahbanou”, together with the people of Iran presented to the people of the United States a unique exhibit of Persian locks which illustrates their culture.
WHILE CITY PEOPLE HAVE ADOPTED WESTERN CLOTHING, IRANIAN VILLAGERS STILL WEAR TRADITIONAL DRESS.
The country of Iran:

Iran is a vast country in the Middle East. It is larger than our state of Alaska.
A common sight in the Iranian landscape is the snowy peaks of high mountains. The regions bordering the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf are lush, but absence of water has created two deserts in the center of the country: the Dasht-i-Kavir and the Dasht-i-Lut.
The birthday of Iran:

Iran proudly celebrated its birthday in 1971. The Shahanshah organized what was perhaps the greatest birthday party ever given. It was held in the ancient city of Persepolis. Magnificent pageants and fireworks took place, and there was . . . . . .
a gigantic birthday cake weighing 72 pounds, for a gigantic birthday: **2500 YEARS!** Not many countries can claim such a long and glorious past as Iran, which was formerly called Persia.
The exhibit:

The great interest of the lock exhibit is to present the close union of technology and art. What is technology? What is art? Make your own definitions as you progress through the exhibit. The 400 locks are highly complex mechanical devices, and most of them are also unique sculptures. Would the locks in your house find a place in an art museum?
What are locks?

Locks are one of the most common ways to protect people and their possessions from outside intruders. Think how you would protect some of your precious belongings. How many locks are used in this picture and what other devices? Would you use as many?
Uses of locks:
The locks for houses not only protect belongings. They also safeguard the security and privacy of the family.
In Persia during the 13th and 14th centuries, men stored their turbans in elaborate boxes and kept them tightly locked.

Here is the lock to a turban box.
Obviously, the doors of mosques, the Moslem places of worship, are fastened with particularly lavish locks. This ornate example is inlaid with gold. The locksmith designed cavities around the lock in the shape of animals and turbanned figures. They were filled with hot, liquid gold which, once solidified, was polished to a high gloss.
There is also an inscription on the lock written in Farsi, the official language of Iran. It is written in Arabic characters and is read from the right to the left.

The translation is: “Allah, Mohammed, Fatima and Hassan.”

Do you know these names?

Allah means “God” and is written الله.

Mohammed is his prophet.

Fatima is the daughter of Mohammed and a person of veneration.

And Hassan is the son of Fatima, and considered the second Moslem imam, or religious leader, succeeding his father.

Can you find these names on other objects in the exhibit?
At holy places, like the graves of famous imams, people come to make wishes and fasten small locks on the gold gate which encircles the grave. If a wish comes true, the person who made it returns to the grave and removes his lock, saving it for the next wish. If the wish does not come true, the lock is left in place.
Locks were also used as good luck charms, or talismans. For instance, when a Persian lady was expecting a baby, it was the custom to tie a string around her waist and fasten it with a tiny lock. It was to protect her from any injury until the baby was safely born. The writing on these lucky locks is often a verse from the sacred scripture of the Moslems, the Koran.
How to make a talisman:

A talisman is for good luck. Do you have some special stones or trinkets that you have saved because they seemed different or precious? That is just the thing to use in a talisman. First: Take two pieces of cord or ribbon, each about 4 inches long. Tie them together at one end in a loose square knot.

Now add some tiny beads. Tie a knot below each bead or cluster of beads. Next, tie on the precious stones or trinkets. At the ends of the ribbons tie on a bright blue bead to protect against bad luck and pull the knots tight. Make six knots in all. Your talisman might look like the one here, or it may be very different. Carry it for good luck like people do in Iran!
Different kinds of locks:
There are many different kinds of locks. The locks in this exhibit are mostly four different kinds of padlocks. The Helical Spring Lock is the type most represented in the exhibit. It is an ingenious mechanism which consists of four parts:
1. The *shackle* or ring which ends as a hook;
2. The *lock guard* which fits into the hook and grasps the shackle;
3. The helical or spiral-shaped *spring* which holds the lock guard in place; and
4. The *key* in the shape of a screw.
When the key is turned in the lock, it tightens the spiral spring and, by releasing the pressure at the end, loosens the lock guard: The shackle springs open!
The Pipe Lock has a screw key like the Helical Spring Lock. But it operates directly on the locking piece without the use of a spring.

The most ancient locks of the exhibit, dating from the beginning of the Christian Era (about 100 A.D.), are Barbed Spring Locks.
They have:
1. A lock body;
2. A locking piece which fits into the lock body to close it;
3. A push key with two notches which presses together
4. Two springs, thereby releasing the locking piece.
The last type of lock is the *Combination Lock*. There is no key for this lock. It works exactly like modern bicycle locks: Three letters, in a secret combination which only the owner knows, must be aligned to allow the shackle to open.

A variation of the combination lock is the puzzle lock.
Animals in Persian art:
Each people has its own very special character which makes it unique. As early as ancient Persia, the art of Iran has been inspired by the animal form. This tradition was so strong that later, when the Moslem religion forbade the representation of any living creatures, Persian craftsmen could not entirely follow the rule.
Note the variety of animals represented on the locks, beginning with this water buffalo.

LOCK IN THE SHAPE OF A WATER BUFFALO
Make a list of all the animals you can identify in the locks of the exhibit and keep score also of which animals are most common.

1. water buffalo
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
6. 
7. 
8. 
9. 
10. 
11. 
12. 
All through the millennia, the mountain goat has been a favorite motif of Persian art. This long-horned goat was decorating a Persian beaker 5000 years ago.

These locks in the shape of goats date to the 17th–18th centuries A.D. See which part of the animal forms each part of the lock.
Ancient Persia was a famous horse-breeding country. Horses are a common motif in Iranian art.

Note which parts of this horse are "naturalistic" or true to life, and which parts are "stylized" or exaggerated.
Some animals convey a special meaning. The lion, for instance, is the symbol of strength. Statues of lions were placed before temples and palaces to guard the entrances from evil spirits.

The representation of the lion on locks surely was meant to add special protection to the safety of the household.
The creation of fantastic animals made of the combination of various parts of several animals is also typical of Persian art. Here is a fabulous creature which has the head of a lion and the body of an eagle. It unites the symbols of the “King of Beasts” and the “King of Birds”. Can you see what he is holding in his talons? It is a pomegranate fruit—the symbol of fertility. Fierce demons, called *divs*, are often combinations of human and animal forms. They are common in Persian art and folklore.
The Demon and the Seven Locks—A Persian Story

In the midst of a huge and beautiful garden stood a little house where an old woman and her seven daughters lived. King Zal, who lived in the nearby palace, owned the garden: But the woman and her daughters worked all day in the hot sun to keep the roses watered and the pomegranate trees pruned. Since the death of his wife and the disappearance of his son long ago, the garden had become the king’s favorite retreat.

Around it ran a tall, iron fence with seven gates and seven locks. Every night one of the daughters locked each of the gates with a big, steel key to keep the demons out of the garden. One evening when the youngest daughter Ladan was locking the gates, a nightingale distracted her and she forgot to lock the last one. That night, a demon crept into the garden through the open gate and kidnapped her. He was a fierce demon and feared throughout the countryside. He was called the Black Div. In his long gray beard hung locks and keys of many sizes and shapes.

“What are these locks and keys for?” asked Ladan bravely. The demon just laughed. “They are for my prisoners,” he replied.
“But the biggest lock of all is for my bottle of life.” That night, when the Black Div had fallen asleep and was snoring loudly, Ladan courageously removed one of the keys from his beard. She then opened a cell in which a handsome young man was imprisoned. “I am Faridun, the son of King Zal,” he said. “Many years ago the demon stole me from my father’s palace and brought me here.”

Together, Ladan and Faridun silently crept toward the demon and stole the biggest key from his beard. As they opened the lock on his bottle of life, the Black Div turned into a puff of smoke and disappeared. Then Ladan and Faridun released the other prisoners and everyone joyfully returned home to the palace. The king tearfully greeted his long lost son, and Ladan’s mother embraced her youngest daughter.

The next day amidst much merriment, a wedding was held for Ladan and Faridun, who lived happily together until they died.