

ZAH LIBRARY'S 23RD ANNUAL LECTURE SERIES - Special Report

By Jangoo Mistry

The much awaited 23rd Annual Lecture Series of the ZAH Library Committee was held on November 11 and 12, 2022 when ZAH members had the opportunity to listen to two distinguished speakers on a vital part of our history.

Most of us know well the sailing out of Iran to escape persecution, and our knowledge of history begins over there. But who among us has not wondered about the *conditions in Iran that caused us to risk our lives and sail over the ocean to distant lands? And what of the forefathers who were left behind?* Our two speakers provided us with an understanding of those historical events.



Library Committee with the Dr. Amighi
And the FEZANA President

Friday evening, November 11, 2022

The two-day program started on Friday evening, when we had our usual meet-and-greet event that set the stage for both talks on the next day. Aban Rustomji, Chair of the ZAH Library Committee and FIRES, welcomed the audience and remarked that this was the 23rd yearly event organized by the ZAH Library Committee and FIRES. She outlined the program which also included an Art Exhibit displayed in the Library, and on the walls of the Purvez Rustomji Room.

Percy Katrak, President of ZAH, mentioned that the ZAH Library has over 900 titles in their catalog, and a permanent display case for the Dr. Dasturji Dhalla collection.

Meheryar Rivetna welcomed Dr. Janet Amighi, an anthropologist, and the author of two books. Dr. Amighi is a scholar on the history of Zoroastrians in Iran after the Arab invasion.

In this introductory session, Dr. Amighi mentioned that she came across the book "Community at a Crossroads" about the Parsis of Bombay. Her early days in Iran, from 1971 to 1978, were spent learning Farsi and living with the family of her first husband who was a Zoroastrian. The couple left Iran just two years before the Iranian Revolution followed by the Iran-Iraq war a year later.

The Shah of Iran, aiming for a more secular society, pushed Zoroastrians to admit non-Zoroastrians into their fire temples. However, in their last year, the Shah's regime had a phobia that the relatively huge number of Muslims would try to convert the remaining 10,000 Zoroastrians. So they tried to keep the Muslims away from Zoroastrian ceremonies and celebrations, and non-Zoroastrians were again not allowed inside their fire temples. Now it is illegal in Iran for anyone to convert from Islam to Zoroastrianism, an event that could be punishable by death.

Dr. Amighi had planted the seeds and piqued the interest of her audience which was evident by the numerous questions she faced.

Saturday morning, November 12, 2022

Introductions

Aban Rustomji started the morning session by welcoming everyone and thanking the speakers. She showed Dr. Amighi's most recent book, "Zoroastrians of Iran: A History of Transformation and Survival", remarking that the book makes for a fascinating read and is available on Amazon.



Aban Rustomji
ZAH Library Chair



ArZan Wadia
FEZANA President

Arzan Wadia, President of FEZANA, praised ZAH Library and FIRES in his speech as a unique "National Archive" of the entire Zoroastrian community in North America. This was the third time this year that Arzan had come down to Houston to support the community's events.

Meheryar Rivetna, who was instrumental in bringing Dr. Amighi to Houston was called upon to introduce her as the first speaker of the day. Meheryar started by saying that he was invited by the NAMC to be an instructor for a course titled Zoroastrians in Post-Sassanian Iran. His research of publications led him to Dr. Amighi's name. With Aban's help, he was able to track Dr. Amighi down and invite her to Houston, with the fervent hope that she would accept.



Meheryar Rivetna



Janet Amighi
Speaker

Dr. Janet Kestenberg Amighi, with a Ph.D. in Anthropology, has done a lot of scholarly research on the challenges faced by Zoroastrians in Iran after the fall of the Sassanian Empire. Her presentation was based on first-hand knowledge gained from her stay in Iran for seven years, and her interviews with Iranians on the subject of preserving their religion in austere times.

Dr. Janet Amighi

Dr. Amighi said her talk was going to be about the transformations that Zoroastrians have undergone in the last two centuries, and their openness to change which has been integral to their survival. She also wanted to address the often contradictory dual status that Zoroastrians have had for 200 years.

She asked herself, why study this? As an anthropologist, it was good to hear the “multiplicity of voices within the community and bring them to the front”. “I may not be very knowledgeable about the religion”, she remarked, but I could answer, “what makes for a good Zoroastrian?”

Dr. Amighi came to Iran in 1971. When people around her saw the Fravahar that she was wearing, they remarked on the good qualities of Zoroastrians, as honest, generous, clean, and kind, leading her to conclude that Zoroastrians, though only 25,000 in number, were very well thought of.

But she found that Zoroastrians in Iran were very scared to get any kind of exposure or publicity. And they were very critical of the Arab invasion even now, in spite of the fact that it had happened in the seventh century.

Arabs, after coming to power, established the classification “People of the Book”, people who had prophets to whom God gave the sacred book and people who were allowed to continue practicing their religion. These were Jews, Christians, and later Zoroastrians who were added to this category. These people were required to pay a special tax in exchange for their protection. But these *People of the Book* had certain restrictions. The men had to wear distinctive clothing. They could not be merchants, travel abroad, or receive an education. They could not build temples and could not be “elevated” above a Muslim in any way. For example, a non-Muslim could not ride a donkey when passing even a Muslim child and had to get off. Unprotected by law, girls were kidnapped, and men were assaulted and killed.

Manekji, who came to Iran in the 1800s, wrote back to the Parsis of India that he had never seen such downtrodden people – humiliated and afraid. Zoroastrians in Iran were disparaged as fire worshippers, as Gabres (*those without faith*), and as Najes (*polluted or unclean*). They couldn’t drink from the same water fountain as Muslims, drink with or serve tea to Muslims. Yet, over time, they came to hold a contradictory positive status as well because many Muslims recognized Zoroastrians as generous, clean, and honest, and employed them as accountants.



Manekji Hataria

During the Constitution Revolution of Iran (1905 – 1911), Zoroastrians took the side of the revolutionaries, supporting them with money and guns. At the end of the revolutionary war, Zoroastrians were invited to participate in government and recognized as descendants of the great Pre-Islamic empires. Persepolis was excavated, attracting tourists, and the Fravahar was identified as a Zoroastrian symbol.

Reza Shah, who came to power in 1925, wanted to establish the importance of Iran’s past and thereby reduce the influence of the Muslim clergy. So he increased the status of Zoroastrians, claiming himself to be a direct descendant of Cyrus and Darius. His right-hand man, Keikhosrow Shahrokh, had a parliamentary position and increased the visibility of Zoroastrians by bringing the Zoroastrian Calendar to Iran. He reformed the religion to make it more attuned to Iran’s modernization efforts – moving from dakhmas to cemeteries.



Keikhosrow Shahrokh Fire Temple at Yazd built by K Shahrokh

But while the reputation of Zoroastrians was enhanced, prejudice still lingered, especially in Yazd and Kerman. The Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, continued in his father's footsteps, displacing **Islamiyat** with **Iraniyat** that emphasized Iran's pre-Islamic heritage. In the secular society that the Shah was trying to achieve, religious identity lessened in importance, compared to education, jobs, and living conditions.

The Iranian world changed overnight with the revolution that ended Shah's rule. The country went from separation of church and state to a deep penetration of government and religion into every aspect of life.



From separation of church and state



To a deep penetration of Government
And religion into every aspect of life.

Once again, the Islamization of Iran was in full swing, and Zoroastrians were faced with numerous discriminatory policies and laws, demoted or fired from their jobs (especially as teachers), attacks on Anjuman and Zoroastrian schools, and subject to a separate slate of more severe punishments. Zoroastrians were once again considered to be Najes or polluted.

So in this fearful time when the world had completely changed for the people, it was back to Hijabs, no dancing, no singing, no plays or concerts, and no alcohol. Religious education was mandatory and properties were confiscated. As a result of all these changes, the emigration of Zoroastrians reduced their numbers from 25,000 to 10,000. The remaining Zoroastrians withdrew into their own safer enclaves.



Women were invited to become Mobedyars

To meet the desperate need for religious instructors and mobeds, mobeds were admitted, even if they were not in the long line of mobeds in their families. After prolonged debate, women were also invited to become Mobedyars. *"Religion was becoming more intellectualized"*. Formality and religious structure in rituals and ceremonies that had never existed before was inserted. Ceremonies became more elaborate, and due to crowding and congestion in Tehran, villages became revived for ceremonies and religious tourism. With the result that the 1979 Islamization of Iran, with all its prejudice and government harassment, has revitalized non-Muslim communities.

Many Iranians turned against the government and have now turned towards their pre-Islamic heritage with a newfound respect for Zoroastrians, with youths wearing the Faravahar. Huge citizen protests were held at the tomb of Cyrus the Great to emphasize their heritage and reject government-enforced Islamization (*Iraniyat over Islamiyat*).

Meheryar Rivetna thanked Dr. Amighi, for her talk followed by an active Q & A session.

Before breaking for lunch, ArZan Wadia requested to speak for a few Minutes.

Gift from ArZan Wadia, President FEZANA and Co- Chair of World Zoroastrian Congress/ZAGNY



It was a pleasant surprise when Arzan Wadia, President of FEZANA and co-chair of World Zoroastrian Congress, gifted \$15,000 from Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York to ZAH for the North American Congress to be held in Houston at the end of December 2024. Accepting the gift were Percy Kattrak (President of the ZAH Executive Committee) and Aderbad Tamboli and Kayo Sidhwa (co-chairs of the 2024 Congress).

Banafsheh Mondegarian

A related theme, from history to present-day life, was covered in the second presentation after lunch on Saturday, featuring our own Banafsheh Mondegarian.

Yasmin Pavri, a ZAH Library Committee member, introduced her. Yasmin's sister lives in Kerman and knew Banafsheh's family there. Banafsheh spent the first 25 years of her life in Kerman, with Farsi as her first language. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree from Azad University in Kerman. Yasmin called her "a great bridge between the Parsis and the Iranis".



Yasmin Pavri



Banafsheh

Banafsheh took the stage and told the audience that she has been in America for the last 14 years, coming to the U.S. after her marriage. She was born in Kerman in 1983, five years after the Iranian Revolution. Living in Iran as a Zoroastrian practicing in an Islamic country was enormously difficult. This was a time when if a Muslim wanted to convert to another religion, he would be arrested and hung. If a Zoroastrian or Christian wanted to marry a Muslim, they would have to convert to Islam and have an Islamic marriage. Banafsheh talked about her forefathers who had to escape the city and live in caves and other hiding places to keep their religion and the fire going. Those times Zoroastrians were labeled as Najes, or unclean.

Banafsheh related an incident that happened to her when she was 8 or 9 years old. The teacher called her to the blackboard to solve a problem and when Banafsheh was done, the teacher took a tissue paper, took the chalk from Banafsheh and threw her chalk in the dustbin. When Banafsheh asked why she did that, she said that Banafsheh was Najes and that if she even touched anything that Banafsheh had touched she would have to cleanse herself by bathing and saying prayers.

Banafsheh's mother, who was educated, took nine years to get a job! As a non-Muslim she was not allowed to teach Muslim kids. At the beginning of every school year, Banafsheh would debate with herself whether to claim that she was a Muslim and avoid all the embarrassment and humiliation or whether she should admit to being a Zoroastrian. If she enrolled as a Muslim, she would have to attend a class for Muslims and learn the Quran. A teacher told the 9-year old Banafsheh that if she didn't convert to Islam she would go to hell and be fed hot tar! But her family encouraged her to keep her Zoroastrian identity and feel pride as a survivor of a noble religion. Due to fear of the ban on "advertising" their religion, Banafsheh did not have her Navjote performed in Iran. Her cousin told her that about 4,000 Iranians had converted to Zoroastrianism secretly and gone underground; that a Zoroastrian priest had traveled to Russia to convert 500 Russians who wanted to convert back to their roots.

Having grown up with a keen awareness of her family's and her ancestors' struggle to hang on to their religious identity amidst a hostile strongly religious society, Banafsheh shared her thoughts on non-Zoroastrians eager to learn Zoroastrianism and become a practicing Zoroastrian. She addressed the Iranian custom of throwing water behind a person leaving their house as an omen of safe return. The story goes that, during the Arab invasion, a famous warrior fighting the Muslims was finally captured, and taken to the general and sentenced to death. As a last request, the warrior asked to be allowed to drink some water asking for a promise that he would not be killed until he drank the water. He then proceeded to throw the water on the ground, reminding the general of the promise he had made, saying, "You cannot kill me until I drink the water".

Today, Iranians prefer to think of themselves as Persians and not as Arabs, and they do not even approve of people who talk Arabic. The situation is in a state of constant turmoil and even a lot of Muslims would be proud to get back to their Persian roots.

Aban Rustomji gave a vote of thanks to Banafsheh and commended her for her very insightful and educational talk.

This was a fascinating journey into the roots of our unusual history.

Art Exhibit

In conclusion, Aban talked about the very First Art Exhibit of our talented community members. Seventeen artists had displayed two of their favorite art pieces that included oil paintings, mixed media, cross-stitch embroidery, woodwork, and models featured all around the Rustomji Room and the Library. Paintings and other artwork like embroidery and papier-mache were displayed in the Rustomji Room, and some eye-popping models were displayed on a table in the Library. Aban requested the artists to stand next to their work and chat with the attendees as they came by. This Exhibit brought forth the incredible amount of artistic talent that is present in our community. A token of appreciation was awarded to each artist. Aban thanked Edul Chikhliwala, Yezdi Engineer, and Vehishta Kaikobad for their work in displaying the artwork and models in an attractive way.

These two days were enlightening, exciting, and enjoyable – a feast for the brain, eyes, and stomach! Attendance at this year's Lecture Series was the highest ever the quality of the ZAH Library events is being recognized by more and more people.

The full Art Exhibits catalog follows:

**Zoroastrian Association of Houston
Art Exhibition**



23rd Annual Lecture Series

2022

Welcome

We invite you to Zoroastrian Association of Houston's First Art Exhibition to bring together in visual form the display of the incredible artistic talent of our members of the Zoroastrian Association of Houston.

We are proud to share works from seventeen artists who have generously agreed to display two of their favorite art pieces. Their art ranges from oil paintings to mixed media, cross stitch embroidery to models.

An exhibition is, in many ways, a series of conversations. Conversations between the artist and the viewer and between the works of art themselves. It clicks when it feels the exhibition has answered some questions and raised even more.

Without the expertise, talent, and tireless energy of Edul Chikhliwala, Yezdi Engineer, and Vehista Kaikobad, we could not have achieved the scale and scope of this exhibition.

Thanks for your support.

ZAH Library Team.

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Avan Bhatena



Irises
24" by 24"

I love my garden and the flowers in it that bloom and wither every year. My irises are special to me and inspired my watercolor.

I then converted the painting to a silk scarf, which also doubles as a splash of radiant color on my wall when framed.



Mother Teresa
16" by 24"

Mother Teresa has been a source of inspiration since my childhood years spent in Calcutta. Her compassion and saintly qualities are reflected in her portrait.

Nauzer Bilimoria



Spring Blossom
8" by 10"

Born in the Spice Island of Zanzibar and raised under the shadows of Kilimanjaro, I have had the opportunity to experience nature in its true innocence. As a young child I was a great admirer of nature and later matched it with an equally passionate admiration for photography.



Spring Blossom
8" by 10"

Rushna Bilimoria



Spring Garden
15" by 19"

This artwork is a kaleidoscope of colors that reflect the everlasting beauty of our planet Earth.

Edul Chikhliwala



Lonavala Fire Temple
16" by 10"

This painting is one of my favorite. The Lonavala agiary contains the sacred fire from Aden where I was born. I have special reverence for this agiary.



Bani Thani and Deer
15" by 17"

The Bani Thani painting is special because I used water-color, acrylic and metallic paint all in one painting. I loved the outcome and now I use this technique often.

Roshni Chikhliwala



Gladioli Flowers

11" by 13"

I have always loved to draw flowers. I love the details of the petals, different shapes, structures and colors. For these gladioli flowers I chose to keep them black and white to highlight their natural beauty.



Love Birds

18" by 16"

The "Love Birds" painting was one of the first one ever done by me. It was simple but it holds a special place in my heart as it was one of the first artwork I had ever created.

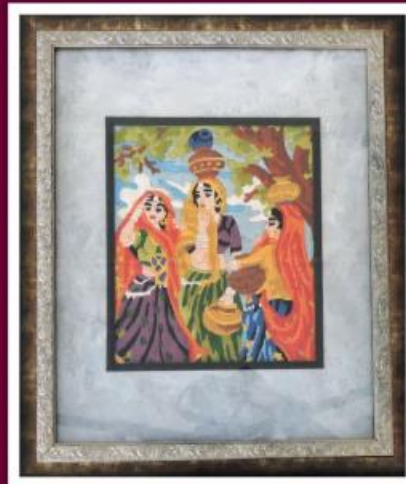
Tanaaz Chikhliwala



Rajasthani Princess
18" by 22"

Since youth, I have always been interested in embroidery. My mother made me do simple cross-stitch projects which eventually became more and more complex. Today doing embroidery is my hobby. It also helps me relax.

For this exhibition I am showing two of my favorite long-stitch projects. I love Indian scenes - colorful and beautiful.



Village Belles
20" by 24"

Firdaus Dastoor



St Basil's Cathedral
20" X 20" base and 21" high

My profession as a Gastroenterologist required the use of hand movements for complicated procedures.

After retirement, I continued this passion with LEGO where I construct complicated objects of beauty with my hands.



The Piano
20" X 20" base and 21" high

Sarosh Dastoor



Taj Mahal

20" X 20" base and 21" high

As a Periodontal Surgeon I work with my hands and fingers doing complicated surgery all day.

In my free time, I developed a liking for LEGO where I construct complicated objects of art with my fingers and hands.

My twin daughters enjoy watching me at my hobby and are proud of my creations.

Tehmi Dastoor

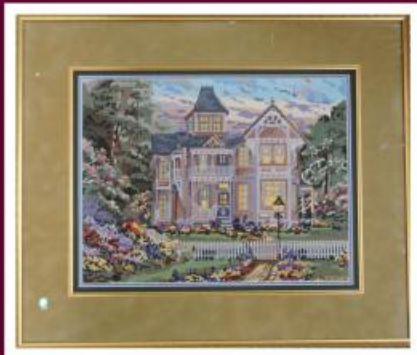


Decoupage - Birds
Resting On a Branch
18" by 22"

My mother was a seamstress par excellence. As I watched her at her hobby with a needle and thread at the sewing machine, I developed a passion for embroidery.

I have made several needlepoint and petit point articles through the years for my home and my extended family

During my second pregnancy I discovered another hobby, that of Decoupage. It is a demanding craft which requires a lot of precision, but the end result is worth the effort.



Needlepoint of a Scene
by Thomas Kinkade
20" by 24"

Homi Davier



Yakuza
30" by 40"

This art of today's Yakuza walking away in a hoodie was inspired by the movie Samurai. It shows ancient Japan, its rituals and the Samurai values that gave me the impetus to create today's Yakuza warrior.



Running Wild
48" by 36"

*I love horses, they are gentle and listen when you talk, they can even feel your pain.
I have done many of them.
Here, a pair of wild horses charge out of the forest and are running free.*

Natasha Dungor



Trio of Apples

14" by 11"

Under Vehishta (Kaikobad) Aunty's guidance, I have created many still life paintings. The "Trio of Apples" is special as it is the first still life painting, I attempted without direct instruction and without a reference. It depicts diversity and shows that even though all three are unique, they still blend in with one another.



Mother's Milk

15" by 19"

I have always been intrigued by how artists can depict emotions through expressions and inanimate objects. With "Mother's Milk", I was able to play around with the expressions and emotions of the calf and show its innocence and its level of comfort.

Yezdi Engineer

Futuristic Agyari
24" X 18" base and 20" high

This Agyari model is a culmination of years of artistic and creative designs depicting the architecture of Persepolis. It is a passion and source of pride to put together this futuristic model of an Agyari. We hope it brings a sense of curiosity and interest in our religion and culture. Someday this model will become a reality. The illustration of flames above the facade represents our sacred fires that are maintained in many traditional Fire Temples. Originally made and displayed as an exhibit for the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress in New York City in 2022.



Wooden Patla
24" x 12" and 3" high

The wooden "Patla" is a traditional Parsi artifact that is used on joyous occasions like Birthdays, Navjotes and Weddings. Built using solid oak without nails, this "Patla" is custom made and decorated with designs, Swarovski crystals and flower patterns.



Abby Erani

A Brighter Future

48" x 36"



A raging sea, a thunderous sky, a parched earth. Is this our future due to Climate Change?

Are we responsible for weather that causes destruction and sorrow. However, there is always Hope for Humanity. The painting depicts this by the golden yellow light that shines through offering us a brighter future.

A Ray of Hope

36" x 36"



I was working on this abstract painting and as I used paint to make the ridges, I felt the painting was expressing the turmoil in the world.

I happened to come across Metallic paper and at the last moment added it to the painting.

Once again trying to show that there is a ray of light and hope at the end of the tunnel.

Behraam Irani



I am a second grader, and my hobbies are art, reading, playing basketball and video games.. I am sharing two paintings with you.

Anyone Can Swim

18" x 11"

Do not be afraid to jump in the water, We all can swim.



People Are Different In Their Own Way

12" x 18"

All of us are unique. No two people are exactly alike.

Vehishta Kaikobad



On Wings of Joy
18" by 22"

Inspired by the Simurg from the Shahnameh, "On Wings of Joy" is a mixed media creation to reflect the joy birds have brought to me since childhood. The artwork is an expression of love, hope and joy in embracing our global community.



Virtually Speaking
36" by 25"

"Virtually Speaking" is a factual representation of conducting art lessons virtually during the 2019-2020 pandemic. The simplicity of the artwork is a demonstration of step-by-step art done on the spot connecting the student with the teacher thereby creating a gratifying experience.

Jidina Mory



The Beauty in Nature!
20" x 17"

I love painting scenery in perspectives and reflections. It puts nature into perspective for me. The idea and the colors are very serene and something you would find in nature. My painting is a representation of how reflections of the surroundings shimmer in the water.

My mentor Vehishta (Kaikobad) Aunty guided me through the process and helped my creativity flow.

Delna Surveyor



Midnight Beauty
9" x 12"

Nature inspired me to paint this picture. I love nature and all things created by Ahura Mazda. There is so much beauty around us and it makes me feel happy and calm. This painting was challenging for me as an artist as I had to come up with different shades of color to get the perfect image of my vision.

Lecture Announcement



FIRES & ZAH Library Present



23rd Annual Lecture Series

Zoroastrians of Iran: A History of Transformation and Survival



Janet Kestenberg Amighi with a Ph. D. in Anthropology and M.S. in Social Work is a recognized scholar in the history of post-Sasanian Iran. She is the author of several acclaimed books notable among them: *Zoroastrians of Iran: Conversion, Assimilation, Persistence* and the very recent *Zoroastrians of Iran: A History of Transformation and Survival*. Her research on Zoroastrian history was funded by the Social Science Research Council which allowed her directly to work with the Zoroastrians of Iran.

With her Iranian Zoroastrian spouse she lived in Iran from 1971-1978. She has also authored several articles in prestigious journals and lectured on this subject in several venues. She lives in Pennsylvania.

In her book *Zoroastrians of Iran: A History of Transformation and Survival* Janet Kestenberg Amighi offers scholarly research on the challenges faced by the Zoroastrians in Iran from the 19th to the 21st centuries. The book provides a detailed perspective on the travails of the Iranian Zoroastrian community in preserving their religion under austere conditions. Her stay in Iran gave her the opportunity to interview a vast number of Zoroastrians to gain insights into their survival in trying times. The book is available through Mazda Publishers.



Born and raised in Kerman for 25 years, Banafsheh Mondegarian will speak about the life, trials and tribulations of living in Iran as a Zoroastrian. She will share her experiences of growing up in Iran and practicing the Zoroastrian faith as a minority there. Educated in Kerman, Banafsheh has a bachelor's degree in English literature from Azad University. She is fluent in Farsi. She lives with her husband Toshar in Houston.

PROGRAM DETAILS BELOW

Zarathushti Heritage &
Cultural Center
8787 W. Airport Blvd

Contact: Arnavaz Sethna
Phone: 281-499-1832 or
cshsethna@yahoo.com
Lunch—\$10.00

Friday - November 11, 2022

6:30 pm-7:00 pm- Meet and greet. Light refreshments.
7:00 pm-7:45pm- Introduction and getting to know Dr. Janet Kestenberg Amighi. Q&A.
8:00 pm-9:30 pm- Potluck dinner.

Saturday - November 12, 2022

10:30 am-11:15 am- Talk by Dr. Amighi: *Zoroastrians of Iran: A History of Transformation and Survival*
11:15am-12:00 noon-Q & A.
12:00 noon-1:00 pm- Lunch break.
1:00pm-1:30pm- Talk by Banafsheh Mondegarian.
1:30pm-2:00 pm-Q & A.
2:00 pm-3:00 pm- An informal interaction with the talented Zoroastrian artists of Houston.