NATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN MUSEUM EDUCATION: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE — A CASE STUDY OF THE IRAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

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Abstract. *Education has evolved from a peripheral concern into a core institutional mission of the modern museum, yet its practices remain profoundly shaped by national cultural contexts. Drawing on the Iran National Museum — the nation's oldest and most comprehensive museum institution — this paper examines the transformation of museum education through three temporal dimensions. Historically, the Iran National Museum's inception in 1917, its relocation to a purpose-built facility in 1937, and its formal opening in 1939 serve as milestones in the institutionalization of modern museology in Iran. gradually shifting its mission from artifact preservation toward public engagement and pedagogical outreach. Currently, the museum implements audience-centered programs including specialized tours, workshops for children and adolescents, seasonal cultural events, and collaborations with the Ministry of Education and academic institutions, however, it continues to face persistent challenges, such as a shortage of specialized educators. Looking ahead, the concept of the Learning Museum and the integration of digitization, Augmented Reality, and Artificial Intelligence offer unprecedented opportunities for accessibility and dynamism. The paper argues that Iran's experience reflects an indigenous trajectory reconciling international standards with national identity.*

Keywords: *Museum Education, Iran National Museum, National Identity, Audience Engagement, Digitization, The Learning Museum.*

Introduction

Over the past half-century, museum education has undergone a decisive repositioning within the institutional self-understanding of museums worldwide. What was once conceived as a supplementary service — guided visits for school groups, docent-led tours, and the dissemination of established knowledge — has gradually been reconceived as the museum's central social mission, inseparable from questions of access, inclusion, and lifelong learning. International instruments such as the ICOM Definition of the Museum of 2022, which for the first time explicitly placed education, accessibility, and inclusivity at the heart of the museum's mandate, have consolidated this shift. Yet the universality of this trend should not obscure its profound unevenness: educational practice in museums is not transplanted from one national context to another as a ready-made model, but is continually reshaped by local cultural traditions, state structures, curatorial legacies, and audience expectations. The history of museum education in any

given country is therefore not merely a local variation on a global theme; it is a constitutive case through which the global discourse itself must be tested.

Iran offers a particularly instructive case in this respect. The Iran National Museum, was established in March 1917. In 1937, a purpose-built facility was constructed for the museum, which subsequently held its formal opening in 1939. as the country's first purpose-built modern museum, grew out of a specific historical conjuncture:

the consolidation of the modern nation-state, the rise of national archaeology, and the desire to align an ancient civilizational heritage with the institutions of a modernizing society. From its inception, the museum was conceived simultaneously as a repository of national antiquities and as a pedagogical instrument — a space through which citizens would encounter, and learn to value, the material testimony of Iranian civilization. This dual origin has left a lasting imprint on the museum's educational trajectory, which has never been a simple adoption of Western museological templates, but rather a continuous negotiation between international standards and national identity.

The present paper examines this trajectory through three temporal dimensions — past, present, and future. The historical section traces the institutionalization of museum education in Iran from 1917 onward, situating it within broader developments in Iranian museology and heritage policy. The analysis of the present surveys the museum's current audience-centered programs, including specialized tours, workshops for children and adolescents, seasonal cultural events, and inter-institutional collaborations with the Ministry of Education and academic institutions, while also addressing the structural challenges that constrain these efforts: the shortage of specialized museum educators, limited financial resources, and the absence of systematic impact assessment. The forward-looking section explores the prospects opened by the concept of the Learning Museum and by emerging technologies — digitization, Augmented Reality, and Artificial Intelligence — for enhancing accessibility and dynamism in educational outreach.

The argument advanced here is twofold. First, that Iran's experience constitutes an indigenous trajectory of museum education, one that cannot be adequately described as the diffusion of a Western model, and whose analysis therefore complicates the standard genealogies of global museology. Second, that the case of the Iran National Museum demonstrates how a national heritage institution can reconcile international professional standards with national identity, and in doing so contribute constructively — rather than merely receptively — to the twenty-first-century transformation of museum education. By presenting this case study, the paper seeks to bring the Iranian experience into dialogue with the international community of museum professionals and researchers, and to identify avenues of comparative inquiry that may be of interest to institutions across the region and beyond.

The Past: The Institutionalization of Museum Education in Iran (1917–1979)

The history of museum education in Iran is inseparable from the deeply layered process by which the country's collections were assembled, housed, and eventually opened to the public. The earliest museums on Iranian soil were royal rather than national in character: the Mubaraka Museum established by Nasser al-Din Shah in the Golestan Palace following his European travels in 1873, followed over the ensuing decades by the collections of the Military College, the Faculty of Agriculture, and the National Arts. These institutions, however, remained largely closed to the broader public. Their purpose was custodial and ceremonial, and their audiences were confined to the court and to visiting dignitaries. The transition from such restricted royal collections to a truly

public national museum was neither immediate nor linear; it unfolded through a series of administrative, architectural, and political developments that spanned more than half a century.

A decisive step was taken within the Ministry of Education; in March 1917, the foundations of the Iran National Museum were laid in a large hall of the old ministry building, with both a constitution and a catalogue prepared for the collection. This nascent institution was subsequently relocated in 1925 to the Mirror Hall of the Masudieh Palace, where the objects remained until the permanent facility was completed. Yet, even this relocation did not result in a genuinely public museum; it is explicitly recorded that the collections were not accessible for viewing or use by the public during this interim period. The decisive turning point arrived with the appointment of the French architect and archaeologist André Godard, whose proposal to direct Iran's antiquities service was announced in 1927, and whose 1928 contract appointed him as the director of antiquities, the museum, and the library within the Ministry of Education. It was Godard who designed the national museum building; following its completion in 1937, the institution was renamed the Iran Bastan Museum (Museum of Ancient Iran), reflecting the nationalist climate of the period and its emphasis on the pre-Islamic past.

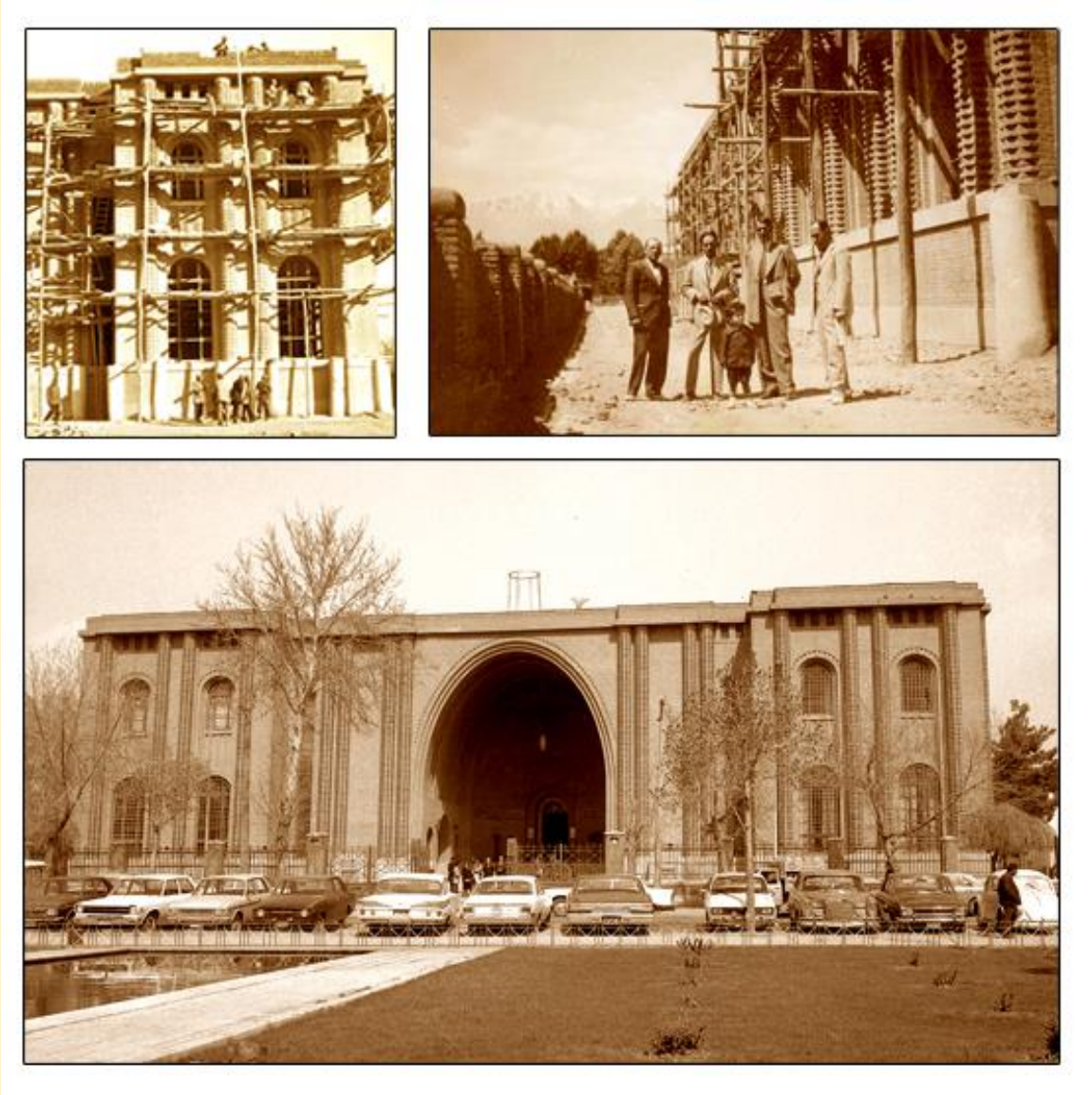


Figure 1. Top: The Iran Bastan Museum under construction. Bottom: The Iran Bastan Museum in the 1960s.

The official opening of the museum took place on 24 April 1939, an event deliberately synchronized with the thirteenth anniversary of the Pahlavi dynasty and the wedding of Crown Prince Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to Princess Fawzia of Egypt. The building itself embodied the national narrative the state wished to project: its entrance, modeled on the Sasanian arch of Ctesiphon, and its interior details drawn from Achaemenid architecture, presented the material heritage of Iran as a continuous historical sequence, from antiquity to the Islamic era.

A symbolic feature of the museum's architecture was the inscription on its main entrance, featuring a celebrated verse by the great Persian epic poet Ferdowsi: *'Tavana bovad har ke dana bovad'* (He who knows is powerful). This deliberate choice not only established a profound connection between Iran's classical heritage and modern educational institutions but also reinforced the museum's pedagogical objective: to suggest that by engaging with the artifacts, visitors would transcend their current knowledge, thereby attaining wisdom and strength.

The museum's educational mission, however, was exercised at this stage primarily through the arrangement and symbolic power of the displays themselves, and through the persistent alignment of the museum with the commemorative rituals of the modernizing state. Public engagement remained predominantly didactic and hierarchical, in keeping with the transmission model of education that prevailed internationally at the time: the museum functioned as an authoritative source of knowledge that visitors were expected to receive, while school groups and dignitaries were guided through the collections by curatorial staff. No permanent education department existed; instead, educational activity depended heavily on the individual initiative of curators operating within a largely scientific and administrative conception of the institution's purpose.

Chronologically, Iran's experience thus differs from the standard narrative that frames museum education solely as a recent, imported innovation. Education was not introduced into the Iran National Museum from abroad at a later stage; rather, the very foundation of the museum was entangled with the pedagogical ambitions of the modernizing state, which conceived the institution as a space through which citizens would encounter and learn to value the material testimony of Iranian civilization. Yet, this founding ambition should not be overread. The archival record demonstrates that for the first three decades of its existence, the museum's public and educational role remained real but structurally secondary: restricted in audience, dependent on individual initiative, and ungoverned by any explicit educational policy. The development of a specialized, learner-centered educational program would require a fundamental reconceptualization of the museum's mission — a process that belongs to the more recent period examined in the following section.

The Present: The Iran National Museum as a Scientific and Pedagogical Institution

The Iran National Museum today constitutes a vast, internally differentiated complex rather than a single exhibition space; its built environment reflects the institution's layered history. The original structure, the Iran Bastan Museum, serves as the repository of the nation's ancient heritage. The second building—the Museum of the Islamic Archaeology and Art of Iran—features a three-story, cruciform, octagonal plan inspired by the Sasanian palace of Bishapur. While the design is attributed to André Godard and Maxime Siroux, the structure was realized between the 1940s and 1950s by architect Eugenia Aftandilian. The Islamic museum officially opened in November 1996, housing Islamic-era collections transferred from the Iran Bastan Museum. It subsequently closed in 2006 for a comprehensive renovation of its facilities and displays, before reopening in 2015

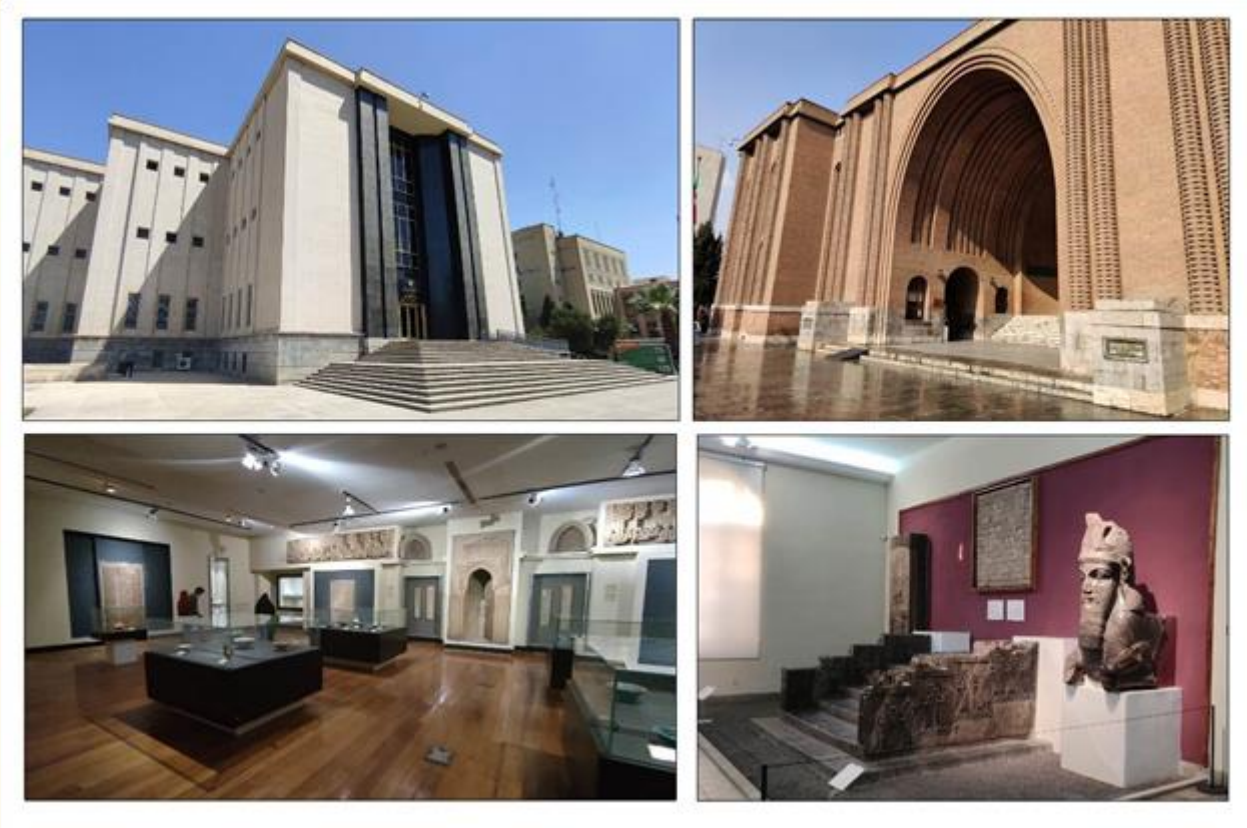


Figure 2. The Iran Bastan Museum and the Museum of Iranian Archaeology and Art during the Islamic Period.

The physical scale of the complex is considerable. The total built area of the Iran National Museum amounts to approximately 20,000 square meters, of which some 8,000 square meters constitute public exhibition space. Beyond the two museum buildings, the complex encompasses a security and shop building, a second service building housing the museum's Palaeolithic, ceramic, and osteological collections as well as its conservation and restoration sections, a protection unit building, utility and service rooms, storage facilities, and a group of structures in the northern courtyard. This architecture of spaces — exhibition halls, research laboratories, storage, and ancillary services — reflects the museum's dual character as both a public-facing institution and a scientific research establishment.



Figure 3. 3D model of the Iran Bastan Museum and the Museum of Iranian Archaeology and Art during the Islamic Period.

The museum's core mission is to collect, conserve, scientifically research, and publicly display the most significant archaeological finds brought to light by scientific excavations throughout Iran, spanning the period from the Palaeolithic to the Qajar era (ca.100 years ago). This mission is discharged through its two constituent museums, supported by eight specialized research departments, a library, a documentation center, and a conservation workshop with restoration laboratory. The museum's collections are of exceptional scale and depth: more than three million objects and cultural materials are held in its reserves, and from this vast corpus some 3,500 selected works are presented to the public across the 8,000 square meters of the two museums' galleries. The majority of these objects derive from scientific excavations, and the works on display narrate the history of the Iranian lands from more than a million years ago through the Qajar period (ca.100 years ago).

The museum's galleries are organized into two major divisions that together trace an unbroken chronological sequence. The Iran Bastan Museum is divided between a section on the prehistory of Iran, encompassing Palaeolithic, Neolithic, and Chalcolithic materials — including stone and bone tools, faunal remains, a Neanderthal tooth, the oldest Palaeolithic ornaments, the oldest Iranian bone flute from the Neolithic, clay figurines, and model houses of the sedentary village period — and a section on the historical era, from the late fourth millennium BCE through the end of the Sasanian period, rich in the celebrated works of the Elamite, Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian civilizations, such as the Hasanlu bowl, the Darius figure, the Parthian man figure, and the naturally preserved Salt Man mummy. The Museum of Islamic Archaeology and Art, for its part, comprises six galleries across two floors: the second floor includes the Early Islamic gallery, with glazed ceramics and stucco-work, the Seljuk gallery with star-shaped tiles and brass vessels, and the Ilkhanid gallery with wall paintings and manuscripts; while the first floor includes

the Quran gallery, with a precious collection of calligraphic Qurans from various centuries, the Timurid gallery with miniatures and fine carpets, and the Safavid, Afsharid, Zand, and Qajar galleries displaying applied arts such as block-printed textiles, intarsia, and Qajar-period painting. Much of the museum's Islamic collection consists of selected works from scientific excavations or from prestigious assemblages such as the endowment of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's shrine.

Beyond its collection and display functions, the museum operates as a site of audience engagement. It is equipped with multilingual guides, offers a range of educational programs, and hosts temporary exhibitions, activities that together position it as one of the principal destinations of cultural tourism in the country, receiving thousands of domestic and foreign visitors annually. At the national level, the museum functions as a symbol of Iran's historical and cultural identity and as a comprehensive mirror of the country's ancient civilization. At the regional level, its possession of the most complete cultural chronology from the Palaeolithic to the Islamic era, together with its holdings of more than three million cultural materials, has established it as one of the principal references for archaeological research in the Middle East. Professionally, its eight research departments, library, documentation center, and conservation and restoration workshops render it an active scientific institution rather than a merely custodial one.

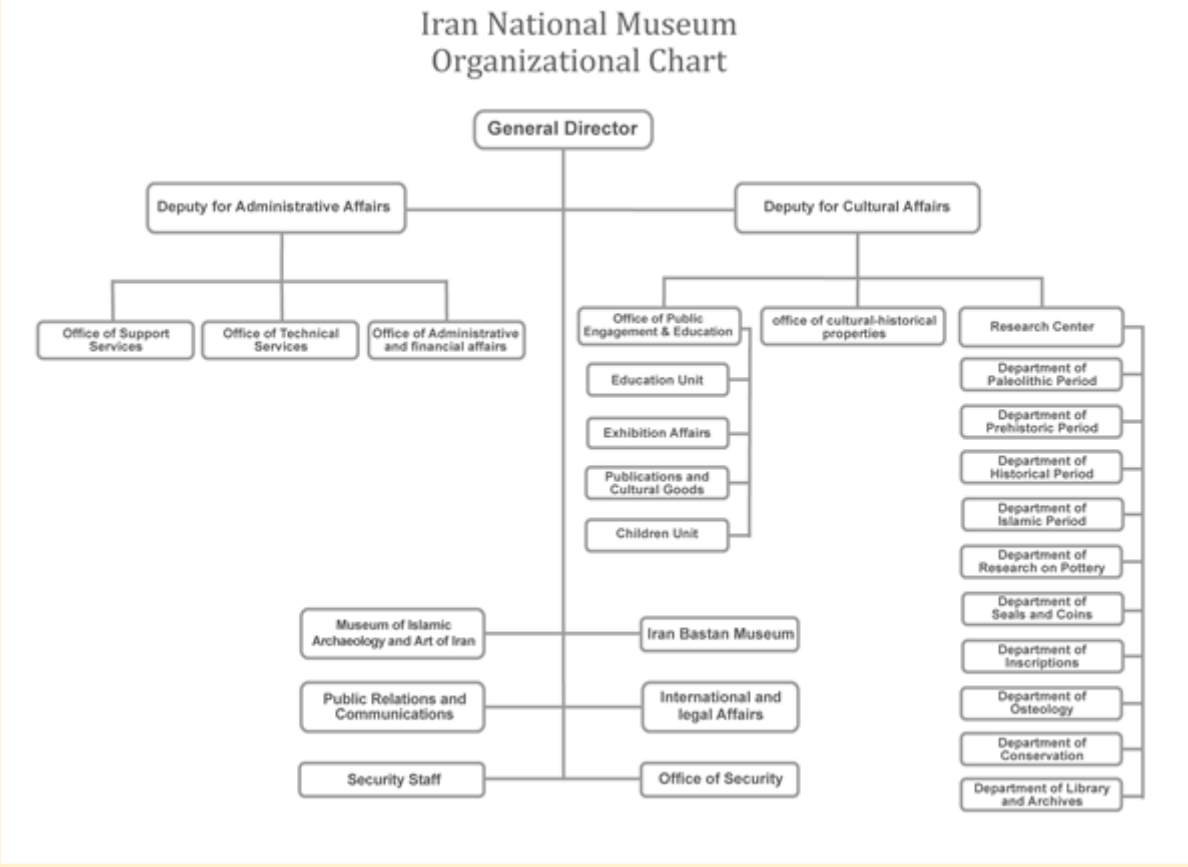


Figure 4. Iran national museum Organizational Chart

Structural Challenges Facing Museum Education at the Iran National Museum

Notwithstanding the institutional depth and scholarly authority described above, the educational practice of the Iran National Museum operates under a set of structural constraints that

it shares, in varying degrees, with many national museums of the region. The first and most persistent of these is the shortage of specialized museum educators. The museum's curatorial and research staff are trained primarily in archaeology, art history, and conservation, and the institution's eight research departments reflect this scientific orientation. Yet the translation of three million objects into meaningful learning experiences for diverse audiences — schoolchildren, university students, families, visitors with disabilities, and international tourists — requires a distinct professional profile: the museum educator, versed both in the disciplinary content and in pedagogy, learning theory, and audience studies. In Iran, as in many countries, this profession remains institutionally underdefined. Educational activities are frequently delivered by curators, docents, or temporarily trained guides rather than by permanently employed, professionally certified museum educators, a situation that limits both the continuity and the theoretical refinement of educational programming.

A second significant constraint lies in the museum's budgetary structure. Museum funding frameworks typically prioritize 'hard events'—such as maintenance, conservation, and capital construction projects—over 'soft events,' including educational initiatives, workshops, and community engagement programs. As a result, the core budget is almost exclusively directed toward collection care, covering conservation laboratories, storage infrastructure, security, and the upkeep of a 20,000-square-meter facility.

In contrast, educational programs often struggle for marginal resources, relying on short-term project grants or inter-institutional goodwill, particularly through collaborations with the Ministry of Education and universities. This asymmetry leads to a practical disconnect: education is frequently organized as a series of episodic events—seasonal workshops, occasional tours, or temporary programming—rather than as a sustained, strategically planned department with a dedicated budgetary line. Ultimately, the museum's impressive research infrastructure stands in tension with its articulated ambition—consistent with international standards—to place education at the core of its institutional mission.

Finally, the museum faces a challenge inherent in its own success: the disproportion between the scale of its collections and its modes of public mediation. With roughly 3,500 objects on display out of more than three million held in reserve — a fraction of less than one percent — the museum's galleries inevitably represent a highly selective narrative. Traditional object-label-and-tour pedagogy can only partially compensate for this selectivity. New media, digital access to reserve collections, and interactive interpretation offer one avenue for opening this hidden wealth to learning, but their implementation is resource-intensive and itself dependent on resolving the financial and professional constraints described above. Taken together, these four challenges — the professional deficit, the financial asymmetry, the missing evaluative framework, and the mediation gap — define the analytical bridge to the final section of this paper, which examines how the concept of the Learning Museum and emerging technologies may allow the Iran National Museum to address precisely these weaknesses in the coming decade.

The Future: The Learning Museum and the Prospects of Digital Transformation

The diagnosis of structural challenges outlined above points toward the conceptual and technological directions along which the educational mission of the Iran National Museum is most likely to develop in the coming decade. Two complementary horizons suggest themselves: the reorientation of the institution around the idea of the Learning Museum, and the integration of digital technologies that can extend the museum's pedagogical reach far beyond its physical walls.

The concept of the Learning Museum — developed within European museum policy discourse and now widely adopted internationally — proposes a fundamental shift in institutional

logic. Rather than conceiving of education as one service among others, delivered to defined audiences on a defined schedule, the Learning Museum treats learning as a core institutional value that permeates every function: exhibition design, research, collection policy, communication, and staff development alike. For the Iran National Museum, whose collections already trace an unbroken educational arc from the Palaeolithic to the Qajar period (100 years ago), this reorientation does not imply the introduction of something foreign, but rather the systematic elaboration of an educational vocation that has been present since the institution's foundation. It would require, first, the professionalization of the museum educator as a recognized staff category, with dedicated positions, training pathways, and career structure; second, the allocation of stable, protected budgetary resources to education, commensurate with the status of education as a core mission rather than a marginal program.

The technological trajectory complements this institutional reorientation. The three most significant levers are digitization, Augmented Reality, and Artificial Intelligence. Digitization addresses directly the mediation gap identified in the previous section: with more than three million objects held in reserve and fewer than one percent on public display, the systematic digitization of collections would allow the museum to make its hidden wealth accessible to scholars and learners alike. A public digital catalogue, searchable by period, material, site, and technique, would transform the museum from a selective showcase into an open archive of Iranian culture and civilization, and would serve as the foundation for remote learning, for teachers preparing school visits, and for scholarly use across the west Asia East and beyond.

Augmented Reality offers a means of enriching the on-site visit without disturbing the material integrity of the objects. The museum's careful, chronologically organized galleries — from Palaeolithic tools and the Neanderthal tooth through the Hasanlu bowl and the Salt Man to the Qurans and textiles of the Islamic halls — could be overlaid with interpretative layers accessible through visitors' devices: reconstructions of fragmented objects, translations of inscriptions, contextual views of excavation sites, and narratives that connect individual artifacts to the wider civilizational panorama the museum embodies. For a complex whose galleries are necessarily selective, AR provides a pedagogical depth that traditional labels cannot convey, and it is particularly well suited to the needs of international visitors, whose multilingual experience could be individually customized.

Artificial Intelligence holds the greatest transformative potential, albeit also the greatest uncertainty. Generative AI could enable conversational interaction with collections, adaptive learning paths matched to each visitor's age, background, and curiosity, and intelligent captioning that translates the greatest transformative potential, albeit also the greatest uncertainty. Generative AI could enable conversational interaction with collections, adaptive learning paths matched to each visitor's age, background, and curiosity, and intelligent captioning that translates technical archaeology into accessible-led programming cannot match. At the same time, the museum must approach these tools critically: questions of interpretive authority, the risk of hallucinated historical content, data ownership over cultural heritage, and the danger that algorithmic mediation may flatten the material, sensory encounter with the original object are all considerations that require institutional governance and ethical reflection rather than naive adoption.

Taken together, the Learning Museum and the digital agenda are not alternatives but counterparts. The professional and organizational reforms of the former supply the capacity, staff, evaluation, and resources necessary to use the technologies of the latter responsibly and sustainably. Digital tools, in turn, offer the means by which a museum of exceptional collection depth — with its origins in the modern nation-state and its eye on the regional future — can

transform the structural constraints of the present into the pedagogical opportunities of the coming decade. In this sense, the future of museum education at the Iran National Museum is not a departure from its national trajectory but its fullest contemporary expression: the use of the most advanced tools of the twenty-first century in service of a Cultural mission that has been at the core of the institution from its founding.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine museum education in Iran through the case of the Iran National Museum, tracing its development across three temporal dimensions — past, present, and future — and in doing so to test the adequacy of prevailing international genealogies of museum education against a national experience that does not fit neatly into the Diffusionist Narrative. The historical record shows an institution that emerged from a specific conjuncture: the consolidation of the modern Iranian state, the rise of national archaeology, and the construction of a purpose-built museum. From its inception, the museum was conceived as both a repository of national antiquities and a pedagogical instrument, a dual origin that has continued to shape its identity into the present. Its educational vocation, far from being a recent importation of Western museological templates, has an indigenous trajectory that developed in dialogue with — rather than in simple adoption of — international models.

The examination of the present revealed the coexistence of substantial institutional assets and persistent structural weaknesses. In institutional terms, the museum commands a unique pedagogical resource: more than three million cultural materials, a complete chronological sequence from the Palaeolithic to the Qajar period(100 years ago) , eight specialized research departments, and a physical complex of some 20,000 square meters that places it among the principal archaeological museums of the West Asia. In functional terms, however, its educational practice remains constrained by the shortage of specialized museum educators, the subordination of educational funding to collection priorities, and the wide gap between its exhibited fraction and its hidden reserve. These weaknesses are not the result of insufficient commitment but of an institutional structure that has not yet fully assimilated education as a core, professionalized, and evaluated function.

The future of museum education at the Iran National Museum therefore depends less on the adoption of new techniques than on the completion of an institutional transformation that the international discourse on the Learning Museum articulates and that emerging technologies now make more feasible. The professionalization of the museum educator, the establishment of audience research and evaluation, the stable resourcing of education, the digitization of reserve collections, the enrichment of on-site visits through Augmented Reality, and the careful, ethically governed use of Artificial Intelligence together constitute a coherent agenda. Each element of this agenda addresses a specific weakness identified in the present, and each is fully consonant with the museum’s foundational mission: to make the material testimony of Iranian civilization accessible to the people for whom it constitutes their historical and cultural identity.

Three conclusions follow from this case study, each of relevance beyond the Iranian context. First, museum education everywhere is productively understood not as the local application of a universal model but as the outcome of a national historical trajectory, and the comparative study of such trajectories — of which this paper offers a single instance — enriches rather than dilutes the global discourse. Second, the reconciliation of international professional standards with national identity, far from being a contradiction, has proven the condition of the museum’s institutional vitality, and offers a constructive precedent for institutions in the wider region facing similar questions of heritage and statehood. Third, the experience of the Iran National

Museum suggests that the twenty-first-century transformation of museum education will be realized not by the displacement of the museum's traditional scholarly mission, but by its extension: bringing the same scientific rigor that governs the study and conservation of collections to bear on their learning value for present and future audiences.

By presenting this national experience to the international community of museum professionals and researchers, the paper hopes to open avenues of comparative inquiry — across the museums of Central Asia, the West Asia, and beyond — and to contribute the Iranian case to an ongoing global conversation whose value depends precisely on the plurality of the experiences it encompasses. In this sense, the museum's past and present are not merely the subject of scholarly reflection but the foundation of a future in which the Iran National Museum, and institutions like it, may serve ever more fully as spaces where the encounter between a people and its patrimony becomes a continuous act of learning.

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