

Hans Hollein

The project and the concept for the Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics materialized from a number of components. I think one factor was my background and my heritage. I have grown up and studied in Vienna, and that city has always been a meeting place of the East and the West, sometimes not so peacefully and recently more so. This was a big advantage.

One of our best Viennese architects, Fischer von Erlach, put together the first illustrated history of architecture in the early eighteenth century. This history contained not only Renaissance and Classical examples, but also a great number of others; starting with Stonehenge in England, it went on to examples like the Porcelain Pagoda in Nanking, plus a lot of Islamic architecture. Knowledge of the latter was of course derived from the continuous relationship between Austria and Turkey. Until recently, most European histories of architecture usually dealt with the buildings of the Near and Far East in the last three pages. The eclectic background of Vienna has left its traces in the architecture of the city; the Church of St. Charles, a mixture of Classical, Baroque and Islamic elements, is the foremost example. My own relationship with Islamic architecture is also a product of my training with Professor Clemens Holzmeister, who dealt very early with countries of both West and East.

I had been invited to a conference somewhat like this one in Persepolis a few years ago, and out of that meeting came some very nice relationships and friendships. One day a few years later I was called by the Chief of the Special Bureau of Her Majesty the Shahbanou of Iran to come to Tehran, to look at a particular building and site and to discuss its possibilities in terms of use as a museum.

There were two aspects to the project: one was an *existing building*, and the other was the assorted body of *works of art* to be placed therein, including different kinds of Iranian glass, ceramics, calligraphy, etc. We deliberated whether and in what way these two aspects could be brought

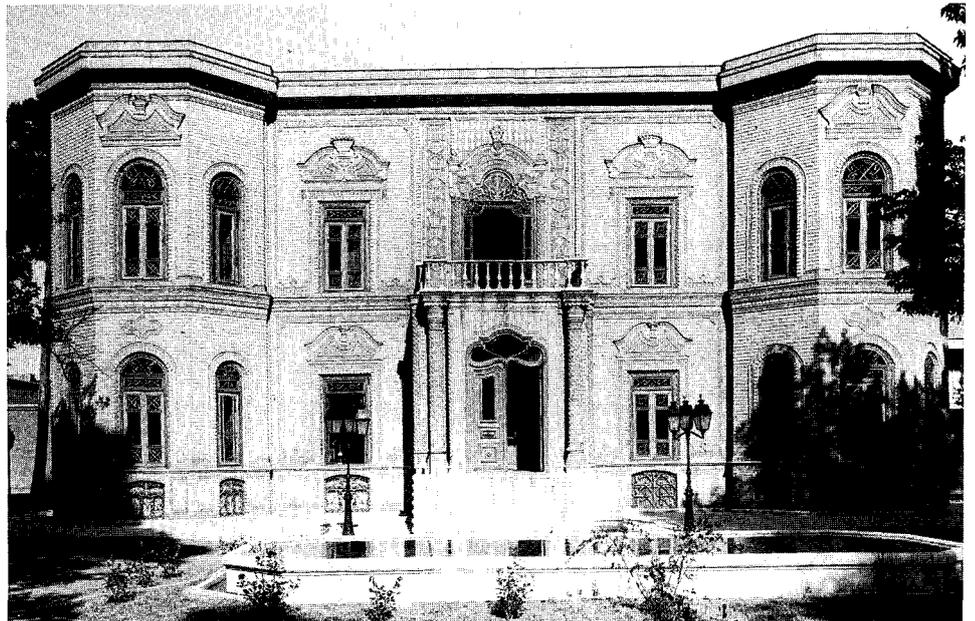
together. The building is of the Qajar period, about 120 years old. The Qajar period was a very interesting one in Persian architecture, but unfortunately one which has only recently been appreciated; many of its beautiful buildings have been destroyed in the past few years and replaced by modern structures. This has often occurred in instances where such destruction was entirely unnecessary.

The Qajar style has a very interesting atmosphere because it is again a meeting point between East and West. It contains a lot of traditional Persian architectural elements, but it also has very definite traces of European ones, especially Rococo, as well as certain transformations of what was being conceived in Russia at that time. We do not know the architects of this particular Qajar building.

Now, a building like this has not been built to any particular strength or durability, especially that required by public use.

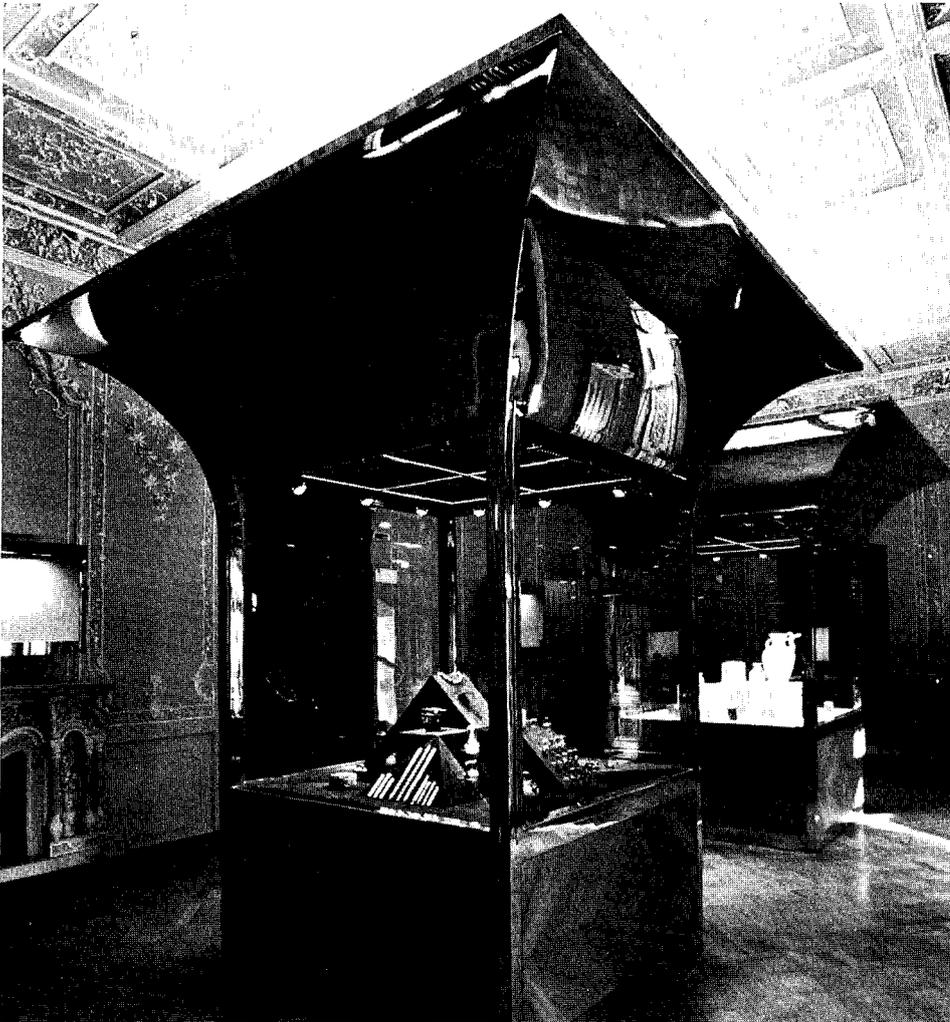
Should we use this old building, or should we just keep the old shell and make a new museum? A museum for certain works of art requires artificial light and some technical equipment, while this type of building was designed with oil lamps and candle-light in mind, and for heating by open fireplaces. For a ceiling it has only very thin vaults. And it has a very definite type of decoration which continues into the fenestration and the decoration of the doors. If we were to apply the physical standards here which we would apply to a new building, we would have to destroy a lot of the existing substance.

We decided to keep the building, to keep it as much as possible as it was, because we thought its use as a public building offered a very good possibility for its preservation and for its being made known to the people as a cultural monument. We therefore made very careful measurements of the building and a photogrammetric



Tehran, Iran: Qajar palace at 55 Ghavam Saltaneh Street, prior to its renovation as the Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics

Photo: H. Hollein



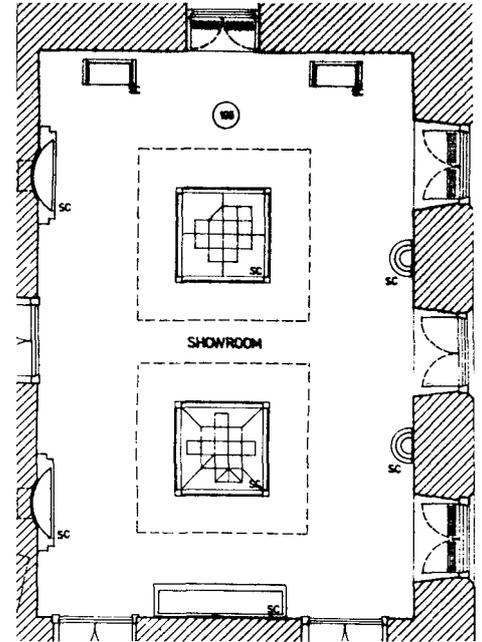
Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: showcase, room 106, containing prehistoric glass and ceramics

Photo: H. Hollein

record of all its parts and façades, and established certain criteria about how to deal with this building.

For this we needed an understanding of the building's contents, which was established in the evaluation process. There were existing collections of glass, ceramics and calligraphy, and private owners and private donors who were willing to give groups of objects to this Museum. There was a policy of buying back objects, be-

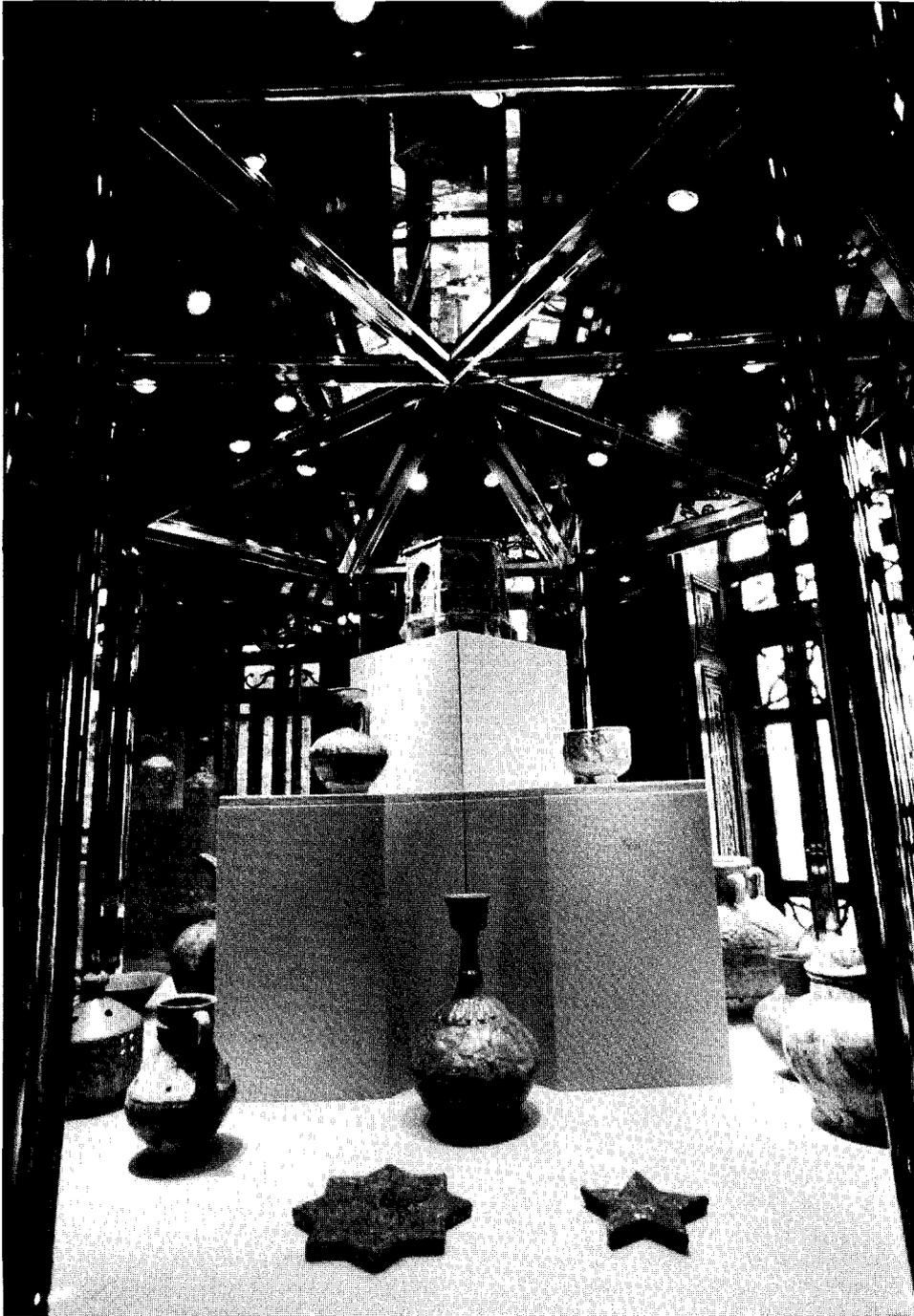
cause many very fine pieces had been brought out of the country in recent decades, and there were also finds from recent excavations. At a certain point it was decided to restrict the contents of the Museum to glass and ceramics, and in particular to the glass and ceramics of Iran. Calligraphy was omitted because examples of this art were deemed deserving of a museum of their own; a separate museum would also have better conservation capabilities for calligraphy.



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics plan, room 106

Plan: H. Hollein

When I arrived, all these beautiful glass and ceramic pieces were in shoe boxes, and we looked at them with the help of advisors because there was no real staff yet. We started to make the first sort of survey of the objects, photographing and measuring them. The pieces of glassware and ceramics date from prehistory, through Achaemenid times, up to the main bulk of the Islamic period and on to the early twentieth century. The presentation of these pieces was of major importance for a variety of reasons. The building was to be kept mostly in its original state, and this meant that certain electrical conduits and ducts for airconditioning could be introduced only on a limited scale. We decided that since a museum of glass and ceramics is, by definition of conservational and security standards, a museum of showcases, the *showcases* were important. They should be the complementary object, to provide housing for a piece and the necessary services

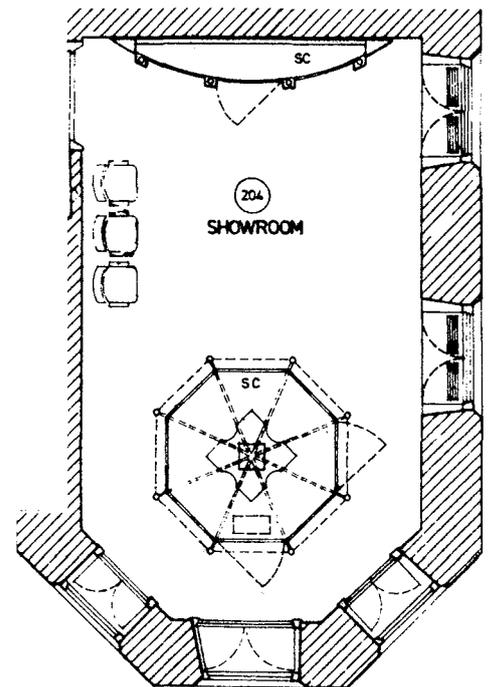


Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: showcase, room 204, containing Gurgan glass and turquoise ceramics

Photo: H Hollein

and equipment to maintain it, as well as to offer a certain counterplay to the existing architecture.

The whole project, from the start of planning to completion, was estimated to require fifteen months, and we kept to this time schedule. The interior of the building is completely covered with decoration, which of course we could not touch. The only thing that could be touched were the floors. These were really very thin structures, so we followed two strategies. In the most important interiors our strategy was to strengthen the floors, keep the space as it was and install independent showcases. In areas which were not in their original state or were damaged, we introduced a second inner shell to create a new space, partly with integrated display provisions. Some special spaces were created which could, for example, be air-conditioned to a specific degree.



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: plan, room 204

Plan: H. Hollein

We started with a very basic design and a very specific model investigation of how the building should be restored. The building was used originally by the Prime Minister of the Qajar period, later as the Egyptian Embassy and eventually for various other uses. The whole planning, production and construction schedule was of course geared to the very short time period available, and an intricate integration of planning and execution was made by careful development of CPM, or rather RNT. This model method is one I developed when I designed a much larger project, the Museum of Art at Moenchengladbach in Germany. We made great use of models and model simulations, not only to study or present things, but also to evaluate such factors as light conditions. The models simulated daylight and artificial light conditions in order to investigate certain issues and to initiate a dialogue with the client, so that he knew what we architects were up to.

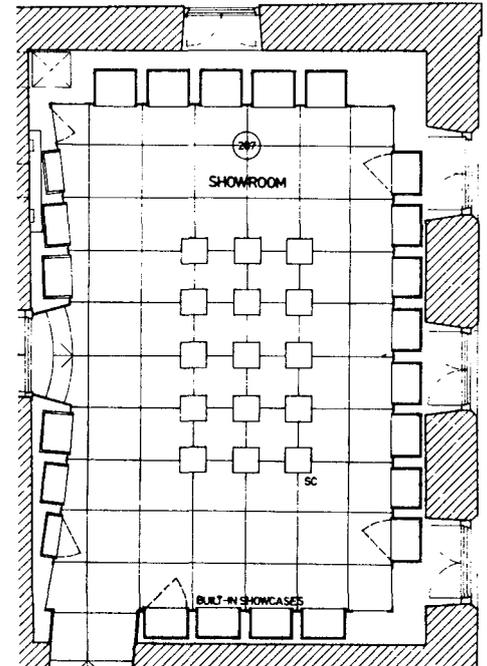
The objects in the Museum of Glass and Ceramics were preserved through the centuries and millennia, and we thought that this should be reflected in their containers. One could of course argue for a sort of neutral background, but there is no such thing, and in fact this sort of background is often contradictory to the content. So, in our design the showcases provide for the lighting of the space and the objects, and they are in themselves highly technological objects which sometimes have airconditioning or humidity control. We have several systems of humidity control because we could not, because of the structural constraints, create a fully airconditioned building.

The question of light was of extreme importance. The objects in the Museum are of such a nature that they should not just be lit with whatever light source is available. Illumination should be in response to the special needs of the contents. Some of the objects of glass and ceramics need point-light sources or warm light. You do not want fluorescent tubes for some objects, while for others you may prefer them; in other cases you want the lustre, the many reflections on the piece.



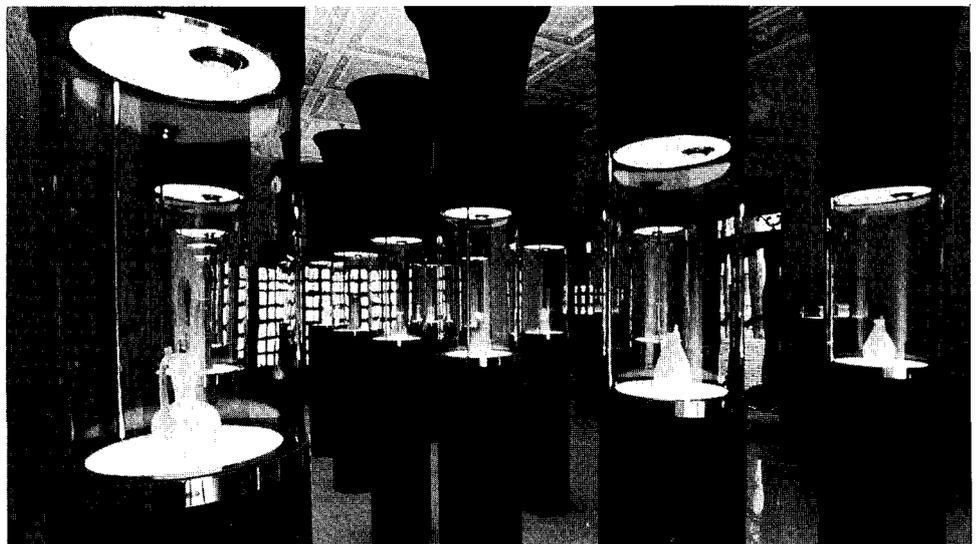
Vienna, Austria: full-scale model simulation of interior of the Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics. An example of the installation of a new shell, it comes very close to the realization of the Museum's room 207. Model simulation by Hans Hollein

Photo: H. Hollein



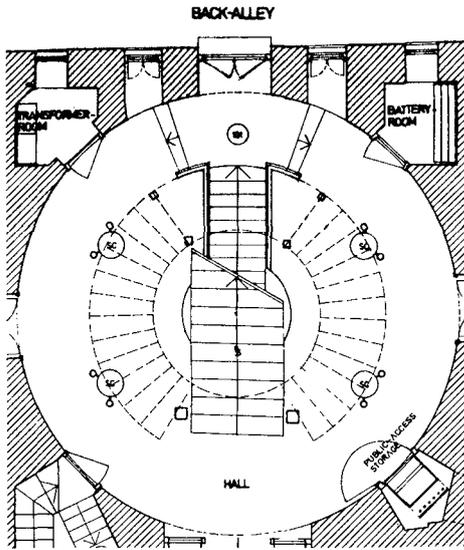
Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: plan, room 207, which contains the collection of lustre ware, "polychromed" and "painted" ceramics

Plan: H. Hollein



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: freestanding showcases in room 107 contain individual pre-Islamic objects and have individually-monitored lighting

Photo: H. Hollein



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: plan, room 101

Plan: H Hollein

Otherwise the piece appears dead, and the idea of this Museum was to show the pieces to their best advantage. A museum should be not only an educational institution, but a place where the objects themselves confront the viewer as works of art.

We gave a great deal of thought to the structuring of the Museum. We finally developed a mixed system which meant overall chronological structuring, although certain aspects or certain material combinations (such as the turquoise-coloured Islamic ceramic pieces) were all put together because of their special relationship. Some parts were singled out because of the specific importance and beauty of an object. Although the existing architecture on the whole is marked by very ornate interiors and these are reflected to some degree in the display cases, there was also some necessity for more sombre display spaces. These were desirable espe-

cially in the area of Islamic ceramics, where for instance the calligraphic plates might be better set apart without any distraction from the decoration around them. A new architectural space was therefore created.

We investigated the possibilities in model simulation and in realization. The lighting was studied in full-scale mock-ups for each major showcase, and many showcases were designed for specific pieces or arrangements. The result was several different types of showcases, about 120 of them in all. Fabrication was done in various places; the more complex single items were done in Europe, mostly in Switzerland. Even the very large pieces were built completely ready, then disassembled, packed and transported by air to Tehran.

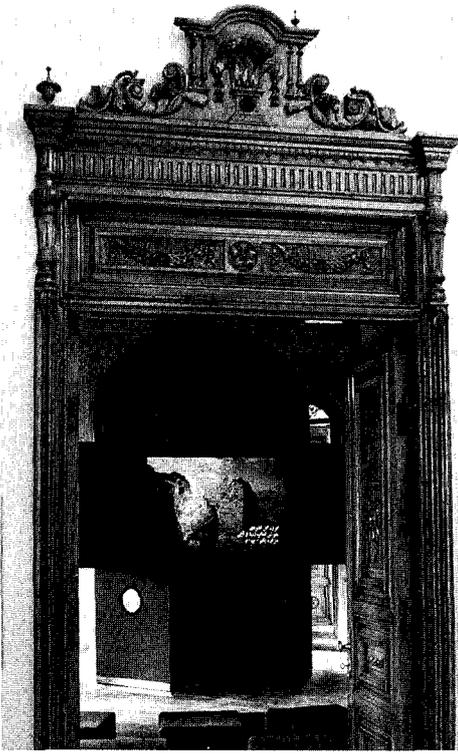
On the first floor of the Museum is the central stairway, which in later periods was completely built over until we opened it up again. On the right is the cloakroom and sales desk and an audio-visual introduction to the collection, plus the first rooms for the prehistoric and Achaemenid periods. Because the building itself was of the Qajar period, evident especially in the very ornate staircase, we put all the objects of Qajar times and the late nineteenth century into this area, in contradiction to the chronological sequence. In the central hall with the opened-up stairway, we had to support the balconies because of the necessary floor loads. We did this by means of columns which became an integral and not an obtrusive part of the installation. We also reused a motif which was omnipresent in the building—the mirrored ornament. We continued this mirrored ornament with the use of highly polished stainless steel or chrome-plated steel. Even the intervention or intrusion of the new is handled very delicately. We did not take away most of the fireplaces, even though fireplaces are no longer needed for heating, because we considered them a part of the interior worthy of integration into the display.

We had to deal with artificial light as well as natural light. The light question was handled specially in each case and for each object or group of objects. However, we



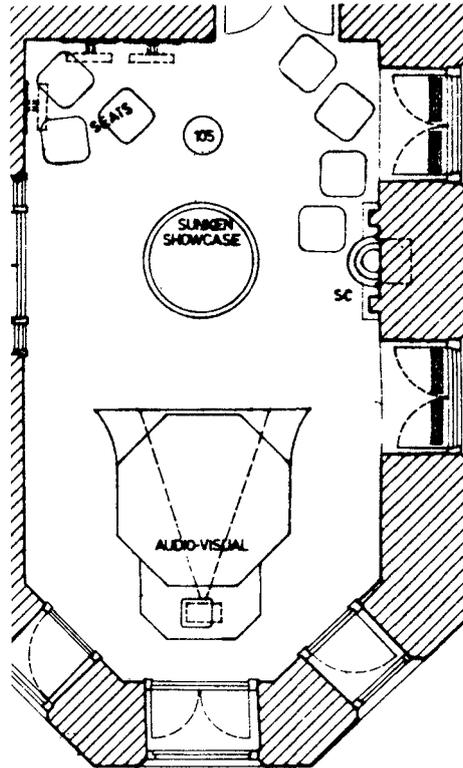
Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics central staircase (room 101) and small suspended showcases containing Qajar and "Bohemian" glass

Photo: H Hollein



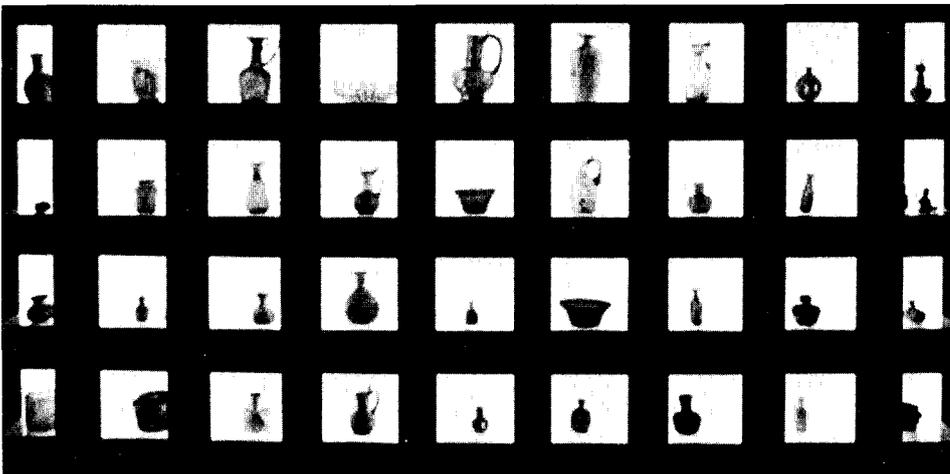
Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics:
audio-visual introduction to the collection in
room 105, viewed through an ornate original
Qajar doorframe

Photo: H. Hollein



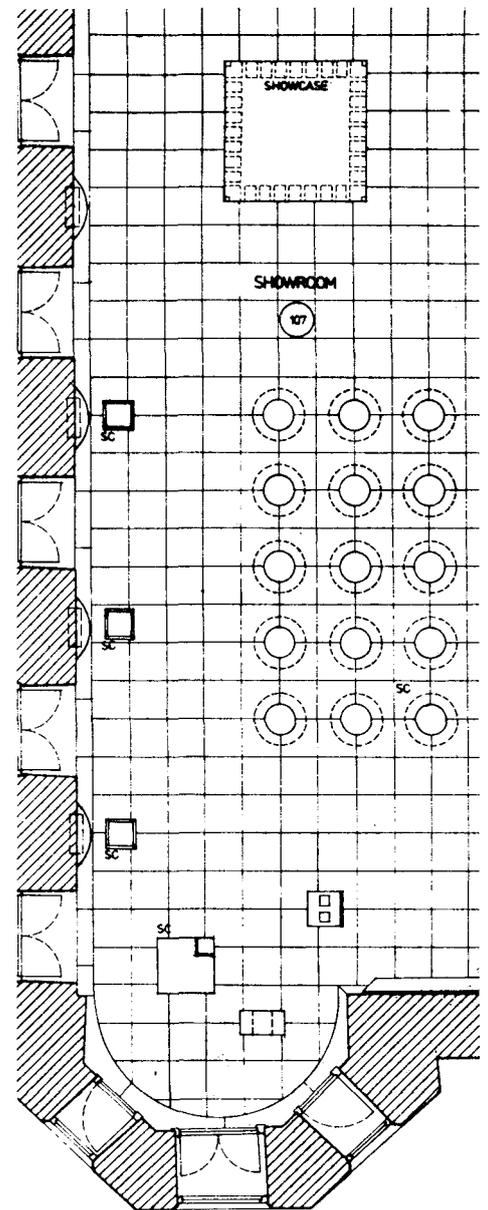
Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics plan,
room 105

Plan: H. Hollein



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: one face of cubic showcase display in room 107, containing
Achaemenid, Parthian and Sasanian glass

Photo: H. Hollein



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics plan,
room 107

Plan: H. Hollein

didn't want to create a museum which was completely static and did not allow any change or expansion. What would be the point of finding a beautiful piece of ceramics or glassware in some excavation, if there were no place in the Museum to put it?

The Museum is conceived not only as an educational institution where visitors learn about techniques or what period an object comes from, but also as a place where one is confronted emotionally by the objects and their quality as works of art. On the other hand, of course you should know something about an object's background, where such things are found, how they are made. We started off with a piece found in an excavation at Hasanlu which was implanted in a floor showcase. Then the lights went out and on the screen there was an audio-visual presentation which

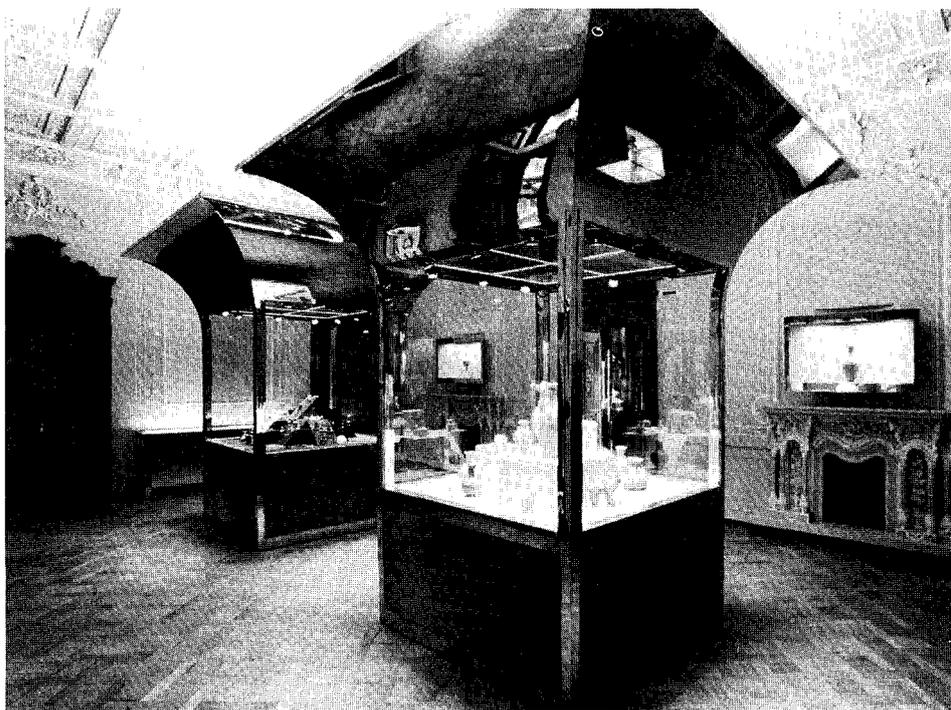
gave information about glass and ceramics, how glass is manufactured, about the sites, about uses, etc., in either English or Farsi.

One of the problems was how to introduce necessary equipment like airconditioning. Normal airconditioning equipment like the fan coil unit was developed for European parapet heights, not for Iranian houses which have low parapets. We developed special new units to integrate with the existing equipment, taking care not to destroy the building. We also used new technology in the showcases to ensure easy handling; for instance, you can open some showcases with the tip of a finger like you open a car trunk.

The Museum contains not only many extremely precious single pieces, of the Achaemenid times especially, but we also wanted to show that glass was a product of early mass production. Thus you see both

showcases and a big cube containing many objects clustered side by side, so the visitor can get the idea that some of this art is found in quantity.

In a project of this nature attention was paid to many details. At the seminar we have seen so many big projects many kilometres long; I am talking about millimetres, and that is why I have gone into such detail. Our objective, I repeat, is to show the objects to their best advantage; to have light but not to dramatize light; to integrate the new with the old. The concept behind the Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics was a harmonious relationship between the old which was to be preserved, and the new which was being introduced. The new, while having an identity and character of its own, would embody the presence of tradition in its contents and in their Qajar setting.



Tehran Museum of Glass and Ceramics: showcases in room 106

Photo: H. Hollein

Note

¹ This paper represents a compressed and edited modification of a transcript of a presentation given at the Amman seminar. This informal talk was accompanied by a comprehensive slide show, and the explanation paralleled the visual presentation quite closely. Therefore, certain inconsistencies will appear when reading the transcript as an independent paper without its exactly corresponding illustrations. However, it seemed appropriate to preserve the informal nature of the talk and to attempt to illustrate the text as exhaustively as possible.