

Spurious Inclusion and Unjust Exclusion: The Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province, Iran

Milad Jahangirfar*

Abstract

In February 2009, the Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province officially opened in Arak, Iran, to honor prominent figures from Markazi Province. The Museum, housed in a historic building, displays a number of busts, photographs, and documents related to these luminaries. However, the Museum fails to effectively fulfill its intended purpose. This paper seeks to show that the main reason for this failure is unreasonable inclusion and unjust exclusion of figures. The former reason stems from a misunderstanding of Arak's historical and historical geography. The 'unjust exclusion' is partly due to a lack of clear definition of 'luminary', and partly as a reflection of the prevalent social and political views of the regime.

Keywords: Arak, Markazi Province, historical distortion, museum, luminaries, exclusion

Introduction

In February 2006, through a mutual acquaintance, I was contacted by a senior student of ethnology in Arak, Iran, who had signed a contract with the Directorate General of the Cultural Heritage Organization (hereafter CHO) to carry out a research project that would eventually lead to the establishment of a museum dedicated to prominent figures of Arak, the capital of Markazi Province, Iran.¹ I was asked if I could offer any assistance. At the time, I had just enrolled at my University in Tehran and was beginning my first semester of a BA in Museum Studies, so I could not be of much help. I did wonder, however, why that person was collecting information about figures that were not from Arak. Later, I found out that the Museum was indeed dedicated to prominent figures of Markazi Province, not just Arak. The Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province (Muze-ye Mafākher-e Ostān-e Markazi) officially opened in February 2009, but I did not have the opportunity to visit it until September 2019, and again in April 2025. While inside the Museum, I did not get the impression that I was in Markazi Province, as the museum showcased prominent figures from various cities with no direct (or even indirect) connection to the province or Arak.

The museum reminded me of a book entitled *The Notables of Arak*, first published in 1993 (Seddiq 1993). The similarities between the book's contents and the museum exhibits are striking: both present a collection of individuals from various periods, some from Arak and others from elsewhere but claimed to have been either Araki or from Markazi Province. In other words, a number of luminaries featured in the Museum (and in the book) are neither Araki nor from the broader geographical area of the province. In fact, those who designed the Museum and selected the figures seem to have followed the book's approach, basing their choices on its (il)logic framework.

In this paper, I will first briefly discuss the city's history, complemented by a discussion on the use of the designation 'Arak' in the context of historical geography. This is particularly important in illustrating how an unclear definition of the term has negatively affected the Museum's exhibitions. Then I will examine the Museum's objectives. It will be argued that the displayed objects within the Museum are presented as unrelated to each other, which in turn suggests their disconnection from Arak and Markazi Province.

Arak

Arak (modern spelling: Arāk) was built during the reign of Fath Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797-1834) in 1808 by General Yousef Khan Gorji (d. 1824), who named it Soltanabad, to be used as a base for the modernization of the Iranian army (Figures 1, 2 and 3; for Arak see, for instance: Desmet-Grégoire and Fontaine 1988; Dehgan 2007; Bosworth 2013; Bosworth and de Planhol 2014; Abbasi Bani and Abdoli 2023).² Its name was changed to Arak in 1935. It is the capital of Markazi Province. According to the latest official census (2016), it has a total population of 520,944, while the province has a total population of 1,429,475 ('Population' 2016: 148, 159). According to the same census, all provinces in Iran are home to followers of various faiths in addition to Shiite Islam. However, most adherents of religious minorities have migrated to other (mainly larger) cities, and primarily to Europe and the United States. The completion of the railway line by 1938, extending from the head of the Persian Gulf to Tehran and beyond, has contributed to the city's importance and industrialization.³



Figure 1. Map of Iran and Afghanistan (1901), showing the extent of Eraq-i Ajam (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division). [Scribner & Co. Persia, Afghanistan & Baluchistan. [S.I.: Scribner, 1901] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2006626010>]



Figure 2. Iranian provinces.
Figure 3. Markazi province and its cities.

It has been suggested that the modern spelling of the name Arak hides an original form, Eraq, given to the region within the bend of the Qara-su, south of Saveh and west of Qom. 'This form must stem ultimately from the designation 'Erāq-e 'Ajām, current since Saljuq times [ca. 1037-1194 CE] for the whole of northwest Persia (ancient Media) as distinct from 'Erāq-e 'Arab (Mesopotamia):'⁴

Albert Houtum-Schindler (1846-1916), who joined the Iranian telegraph service in 1868 to serve as inspector-general, noted that under the Caliph Muaviyyah (661-679 CE), the southern half of Persia and Khorasan was subordinate to the government-general of Basrah, and the remainder of the Persian provinces (almost equivalent to ancient Media) to that of Kufah. The latter, along with the part of Persia under it, formed the great province of Irak (Houtum-Schindler 1897: 4). The sub-provinces east of the Zagros range then became known as Irak ul 'ajām, i.e. the foreign Irak, to be distinguished from Irak ul 'arab, i.e. the Arabian Irak, which was situated west of the Zagros. Consequently, the Governor-General of Kufah had the title 'Governor of the Two Iraks' (Houtum-Schindler 1897: 4). Later on, Azerbaijan and the Caspian provinces were detached from Persian Irak. This area included the current provinces and districts of Tehran, Qazvin, Zanjan, Hamedan, Kermanshah, Luristan, Isfahan, Kashan, and Qom. In the thirteenth century, during the era of the Mongol Ilkhanids, Persian Irak comprised nine provinces such as Isfahan, Qom, and Hamedan. Houtum-Schindler (1897: 4-5) adds that the term Irak 'ajām, once a designation for a province or region, has fallen into disuse; currently, Irak refers to a small district southwest of Qom, with Sultanabad, also known as 'Shahr i No' (meaning New Town), serving as the residence of its governor. It is noteworthy that the designation Eraq was in limited use until about 50-60 years ago. While collecting the information for this article, I came across individuals in their late fifties or early sixties who remembered that some house numbers of old houses in Arak were accompanied by the term Eraq. As mentioned earlier, the name of the city was changed from Sultanabad to Arak during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941) and upon the construction of the railway.

It is therefore clear that the toponym 'Eraq-e Ajām' (and its variants) referred to a large territory whose boundaries constantly changed over time. The land that is now present-day Arak was situated within that territory, although the city did not exist in such remote periods. Thus, it is not surprising to find 'Eraqi' (i.e., 'of Eraq') in the name of some historical characters who lived centuries before the foundation of modern Arak.

Most of the books published on the city (and also the museum studied here) begin with associating Arak with Eraq-i Ajām without realizing how anachronistic it sounds. Such arguments distort the city's history, effectively positioning Arak against a skewed historical narrative. As a result, many individuals with little to no direct connection to the city (temporally and/or geographically) are included in lists of its notable figures and luminaries. A good example is Parvin Etesami (1907-1941), a poetess born in Tabriz (the capital of East Azarbaijan Province) who passed away in Qom. Her father, Mirza Yousef Etesam al-Molk (1874-1938) was born in Tabriz and died in Tehran. Her mother, Akhtar Shuri Bakhshayeshi, was also from Tabriz (Bakhshayeshi is a town in East Azarbaijan Province). Her paternal grandfather, Ebrahim Mostowfi al-Mamalek, hailed from Ashtiyan.⁵ Some scholars interpret this remote connection to consider Parvin Etesami a prominent figure of Markazi Province.⁶ However, if such a criterion is sufficient, why are so many others with similarly tenuous links to this province excluded?

Another notable example is Forugh Farrokhzad (1934-1967), who is listed in *The Notables of Arak* as a poetess from Markazi Province. The family of Forugh's father, Mohammad Farrokhzad, came from Bazargan village in Tafresh county, located some 73 km northeast of Arak, as the crow flies.⁷ Forugh herself was born and raised in Tehran. Neither she nor her father had any direct connection to Arak, yet some writers have used this remote connection to claim that this avant-garde female poet of the twentieth century, who significantly influenced modern Persian poetry and tragically died in a car crash at age 32, was from Arak.⁸ It is important to note that Forugh is not included in the Museum (see below).

Perhaps even more perplexing ones are cases involving figures who lived long before the foundation of the city. For instance, mention could be made of Fakhr al-Din Ebrahim Eraqi (1213/14-1289 CE), a Sufi poet and author born in Kom(i)jan, a town roughly 50 km northwest of Arak and 50 km east of Hamedan.⁹ However, during Fakhr al-Din's lifetime, Arak did not

exist yet. Furthermore, Fasih Khwafi (1375-1442 CE) has recorded Eraqi's name and style as 'Eraqi the Hamedani Farahani Poet' (Safa 1990: 596). While Farahan (ca. 55 km north of Arak) is today a town in Markazi Province, 'Hamedani' refers to the city of Hamedan, a major city with a long history of human habitation, some 130 km northwest of Arak, and the capital of a province of the same name. Therefore, this raises a matter of historical geography, and a logical question would be whether one should regard Farahan, during Eraqi's lifetime, as a village or town in the proximity of Hamedan or as a locality near a city or within a province that did not exist until much later?

These attempts reveal, among other insights, that some scholars of this city have been trying to establish a history for Arak that extends beyond the actual historical events leading to its foundation in 1808 CE. Their core argument centers on the word 'Arak' and its variants, often overlooking the fact that the term has been applied to a broad geographical area with shifting boundaries over the centuries. Another aspect of their arguments is the existence of other towns and regions within the province that are much older than Arak. For instance, Saveh, located approximately 120 km northeast of Arak, has a richer history than Arak. The earliest inscription discovered in the grand mosque of Saveh indicates that its construction dates back to the tenth century CE. Yet, the geometric design of a part of the mosque complex suggests that it originally served as a pre-Islamic Zoroastrian fire temple (see, for instance: Afshar and Javadi 2023). Thus, it seems that some authors have tried to establish a historical narrative for Arak, competing with other cities and towns in the province.

The Museum

Opened to the public in February 2009, the Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province is housed in a building known as Khakbaz's Mansion, which covers roughly 400 square meters in a land of 2,800 square meters. The construction of this two-story building began at the end of the Qajar period (1789-1925 CE) and was completed after four years in 1929. The architectural plan was devised by a Russian engineer, and the construction was carried out by Morad Chamani Araki.¹⁰ The building is designed in a pavilion style, featuring brick decorations typical of the Qajar period, and includes two porches on the eastern and western sides (Figures 4 and 5). The complex also contains a bathhouse situated in one corner of the courtyard and two *qanats* (a water-supply system for transporting water to the surface from an aquifer or a well through an underground aqueduct).



Figure 4. The entrance to the Museum's building, with a pair of identical busts of Amir Kabir.
 Figure 5. The southwest side of the Museum's building.

The Museum has a large courtyard with two entrances opening to two major streets, one of which is only a few meters away from the Art Faculty of the University of Arak. Since only entering the Museum's building requires a ticket, one can use the courtyard as a shortcut, or for resting after a walk.

The building of the Museum was registered as a national heritage monument in 2000. In 2005, the structure was purchased through the cooperation of the Governor's Office of Markazi Province, the CHO, and the heirs of Khakbaz, with the aim of establishing a museum.

Following the 1979 revolution, the preservation of historical buildings became increasingly intertwined with the establishment of new museums, leading to significant problems regarding whether such structures could provide a safe environment, considering factors like relative humidity and temperature. Among many historical buildings, public baths were often converted into museums, frequently focusing on ethnography, without adequately addressing these critical environmental considerations. To serve two ends with one effort, this approach led to the emergence of a number of museums in various cities across the country. Arak's Four Seasons Bath House Museum, built during the Qajar period and presently serving as an ethnography museum, is one such example.¹¹ Originally constructed as a bathhouse, its uncontrolled conditions make the building a complex damaging mechanism threatening the artifacts that it is supposed to preserve. This approach gives rise to important debates, which I do not intend to delve into here. Indeed, Iranian museologists generally acquired good experience and knowledge of converting historic houses into museums prior to 1979. One of the notable successful examples is the Glass and Ceramic Museum in Tehran, commissioned by the Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi Bureau. This house, once owned by Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam (1870-1955), was transformed into a museum by a joint Austrian-Iranian-German team led by Hans Hollein (see Hollein 1980). However, due to several challenges, the utilization of that knowledge and experience was limited after 1979.

Although Khakbaz Mansion has undergone refurbishment, it is still not a suitable place to serve as a museum. An old, surviving house—built and owned by one of Arak's rich and influential figures in the past—has been turned into a museum dedicated to a number of prominent individuals who have little or no connection to the house itself, and some of whom are even unrelated to the province.

Whilst the general layout of the interior has been preserved, the house has undergone many changes so that even the windows with their old-style colorful glass panes (Figure 6) and the old closet doors that still exist in one or two rooms barely convey the grandeur of the house's former majestic state. Some modifications result from renovations to convert the house into a museum, such as plastering the walls and installing CCTV and lighting.



Figure 6. Mahmoud Hesabi's bust and portrait.

The exhibits are displayed in two stories. On the first floor, one room is dedicated to old photography equipment donated to the Museum by Mohammad Ali Davari. Photographs of Arak, which are displayed on the first floor, form an attractive part of the Museum as they demonstrate how the city has changed over time and hold the potential to form the basis of a separate museum (see below). A bigger room is dedicated to the luminaries, who are introduced through their busts, paintings, and various documents such as awards and academic certificates.

The space beneath the staircase, which leads to the second floor, has been used to display a series of documents related to the Society for the National Heritage of Iran. However, during my second visit to the Museum, there was no lighting in this section making it difficult to see the contents of the documents (Figure 7). The importance of this small part of the Museum is due to achievements of the Society, especially before 1979. The National Monuments Council of Iran was formed in 1922 and launched its major projects following Reza Shah Pahlavi's ascension to the throne. The Council had branches in various cities and was responsible for constructing numerous monuments, museums, and mausoleums, as well as publishing several dozen books, including manuscripts, prose, and poetry of classic authors. After 1979, the Council lost its prominence and its name was changed to the Society for the Advancement of Culture and shortly afterward to the Society for the National Heritage of Iran, with its activities limited mainly to publishing certain books (see Bahrololumi 1976; Rafi 1992).¹²

The second floor appears somewhat more organized. This floor houses a number of religious figures, artists, and it has a small room dedicated to Amir Kabir (1807-1852) and his predecessor Qaem Maqam Farahani (1779-1835).



Figure 7. A small area for exhibiting documents concerning the Society for the National Heritage of Iran.

It appears that within the Museum's scope, only calligraphers and painters are considered artists. Fields such as music and cinema and other forms of art are totally absent. This lacuna in the Museum's narrative is particularly noteworthy because Arak and a few other towns—most notably Saruq—in the province have been famous for producing hand-made carpets and rugs. The Ziegler enterprise—a Manchester-based firm, a branch of the Swiss import-export firm Ph. Ziegler and Company—in Arak is the earliest known attempt for organizing carpet manufacture in Iran with foreign capital in the nineteenth century (see Ittig 1992). It is therefore egregious that no carpet designer or manufacturer is introduced in the Museum.

The Amir Kabir Hall is a small room connecting the landing area to the 'artists' room'.

Amir Kabir served as chief minister to Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-1896) during the first three years of his reign. It is noteworthy that the word 'Dar al-Fonun' (lit. Polytechnic College) appears above the entrance to this room, with the inscription 'Amir Kabir Hall' written below in a smaller font (Figure 8). This suggests that one of Amir Kabir's notable achievements—an act which people should honour and celebrate—is the foundation of Dar al-Fonun *in Tehran* during his ministerial term.



Figure 8. Amir Kabir's room.

Another hall on the second floor is dedicated to several religious figures, most notably Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989). Just before entering this room, visitors encounter busts of Fakhr al-Din Eraqi and Parvin Etesami guarding the door. A notable modification to the original design of the room is the addition of an interior balcony, intended to evoke Khomeini's house in Jamaran, where he often delivered his speeches from an overlooking balcony. However, the room is too small to effectively convey this impression. Also, visitors need to have seen photographs or footage of his speeches in Jamaran prior to visiting the Museum to understand what the balcony implies as no information is provided.

It was mentioned earlier that religious minorities have lived in Arak and other cities of the province and have contributed to its development. However, the Museum mentions only one Christian figure: Hovik Minasyan, born in 1952. There is no other mention of other religious minorities or their contributions to the province.

Outside the building, visitors can enjoy the courtyard, shaded by old trees. However, most of the courtyard is now occupied by cafés and restaurants. In fact, it has become increasingly common for museums in Iran to have cafés or shops, offering visitors a comfortable space to rest, reflect, and buy souvenirs. This strategy helps museums with expenses and attracting more visitors. In Iran many old mansions—often situated in gardens or surrounded by expansive courtyards—have begun to exploit this opportunity as a source of income. However, as is often the case in this country, these shops are not managed directly by the museums but are leased to anyone who is willing to pay higher rent. Consequently, there are a few cafés and restaurants on the Museum grounds in Arak, and no gift shops for buying souvenirs, books, or brochures. While this arrangement remains profitable for the CHO, the market sector operates independently of the Museum's mission. It could be said that the Museum appears almost as an extra or unwelcome presence among the surrounding restaurants and

cafés. Considering the entire complex, the historic house seems to serve the interests of the commercial sector at best. This is confirmed by the sign arching above the main entrance of the complex, which reads 'Luminaries Garden Restaurant', with no mention of the Museum. In fact, the name of the Museum appears only above the entrance to the Museum's building, not at the complex's main entrance. Although this can have positive economic impacts, it risks undermining the Museum's cultural and educational roles, leading to a loss of its original purpose and significance. Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann (2022: 204, n. 2) rightly highlights that income-seeking governments 'often focus on economics, but they need to pay more attention to the—difficult to measure—social and cultural costs'.

While the brick façade and the overall style of the building may give the impression of visiting a late Qajar/early Pahlavi structure, this impression quickly fades as visitors walk around the building and encounter modern furniture and menus offering foreign dishes. Even the entrance to the old, underground bath is now surrounded by chairs and tables.

Discussion

The Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province displays busts, photographs, and documents of various historical and contemporary figures. While it is claimed that these individuals are connected to Markazi Province, closer scrutiny reveals that many of them have nothing to do with the region.

Scholars who study Arak and its history often begin with the city's name and trace its origins back to a time when a variant form of 'Arak' referred to a large geographical part of Iran. The Museum, obviously based on the same logic, includes figures who are neither from Arak nor the province. In other words, instead of focusing on prominent characters who truly contributed to the growth of the province and occasionally played significant roles on the political or cultural stages of the country, the Museum tries to grasp what does not belong to the geographical entity in question.

The Museum fails to show what the so-called luminaries have in common or how they are connected to Markazi Province. This issue is reflected both in the objects the museum displays and in how it represents its core concept. This can be discussed from various points of view. For instance, one might question what each of these figures has contributed to society or their respective fields. Would it not be better to group related figures together—such as political activists in one room and artists in another—arranged chronologically? The current presentation, in which the figures are unrelated to each other (apart from the mistaken claim that they all originated from the same region), contributes to the museum's inability to offer a coherent narrative. The written information—often wordy—mainly give dates of birth and death and a general Wikipedia-like description of the characters, without being able to connect them to the province. In fact, it is not clear what each of these figures have achieved and how they have impacted people's lives. What contributions have Araki artists made to the arts? What roles have Araki thinkers played in advancing knowledge or epistemology? In other words, similar to Ruhollah Khomeini's case, visiting this museum requires pre-existing knowledge, as the Museum itself provides only little information about these luminaries.

The Museum has rooms dedicated to religious figures, politicians, and artists. Nonetheless, one may question the definitions of, for instance, 'art' and 'artist'—if any—based on which the curators have worked. It appears that calligraphy and painting are the only forms of art recognized. Even the room displaying photography—with its collection of old cameras from various generations—hardly balances the museum's perspective on art.

So far the discussion has primarily focused on the figures included in the Museum. However, the fact remains that many individuals native to Markazi Province are absent from the museum's narrative: creating a gap that distances the museum from being a place where every citizen can feel connected. Also, visitors from other provinces may not be willing to accept parts of the story told within its walls.

The collection of a museum—especially when it serves a large community as its audience—is composed not only of the exhibited objects and information provided, but also of what is absent, as the silence of missing elements can speak just as loudly. Hence, museums can be double-edged swords. This underlying issue, if not carefully managed, can lead to

unjust exclusion. Consequently, the museum not only fails to fill the gaps in the society and overcome inequalities but also exacerbate tensions. For instance, while the Museum has, within its limited space, emphasized figures like Amir Kabir, there is no mention of Mohammad Qavam al-Dowla (d. 1873), a governor of Khorasan and Fars during the reign of Fath Ali Shah and Naser al-Din Shah. There is a bust, a rather big oil painting, and a few documents related to the physicist Mahmoud Hesabi (1903-1992, born in Tehran to Tafreshi parents, see fig 6.), whereas there is no mention, for instance, of Mahmoud Sanai (1919-1985, born in Arak), a psychologist, psychoanalyst, and educator. Gordon Fyfe (2006: 33) states that 'the significance of the museum is now apparent in the study of inequality, tourism, popular culture, and visual depiction. Sociologists have begun to register an interest in how culture is exhibited, in what is shown, in who displays things, and in who consumes museum meanings'. He then adds that 'the politics of identity associated with new social movements means that, whereas museums once submerged difference in the bounded selves of universal citizenship, they are today called to recognize the plurality and flux of identities' (Fyfe 2006: 39). This is precisely where the Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province falls short: who has made choices for this museum? What social hierarchy does the Museum embody? Who are the selected luminaries? What social class, political orientation, art schools, and historical periods do they represent? And what criteria determine the exclusion of other notable figures (see also Anderson 2019)?

Of course, the dichotomy of *inclusion and exclusion*, particularly in social terms, is a complex issue that cannot be addressed in detail here. The central concern lies in the nature of excluding or including individuals or groups, and in what may consequently be omitted from or introduced into the museum narrative. For instance, Karl Popper has 'argued that groups promoting intolerance do not deserve inclusion in a democratic society; indeed, they should be excluded from that society' (see Felix 2024: 4). Cathrine Victoria Felix (2024: 6) explains that 'relationship between inclusion, exclusion, and democratic processes is pivotal for societal progress. Balancing these dynamics is key to achieving societal progress loosely understood as positive advancements and improvements in various aspects of a society, such as economic development, social equity, education, technology, health, and political stability'. Felix's discussion highlights that inclusion and exclusion do not inherently have positive or negative connotations. One may argue that the way this dichotomy is addressed in a museum depends on its institutional strategies, as well as on overarching policies established by governments.

With regard to '*groups promoting intolerance*', for example, a museum may choose to focus on the consequences of their attitudes and actions rather than dismissing them altogether, which would risk overlooking issues that could otherwise be brought to the audience's attention. In the case of Arak's museum, however, practices of inclusion and exclusion seem to take place without a clearly articulated agenda.

In fact, one cannot help but wonder about the rationale on which the museum's curators have approached these figures. Have the designers had any specific criteria or have they selected these characters somewhat arbitrarily—perhaps based on familiarity with the selected individuals or personal preference? Volker Kirchberg (2016: 234) has noted that '[p]eople in postmodern societies are going to museums in a search for security and for an emancipatory understanding of the world, and museums must then be prepared to interpret the world in all of its complexity'. Considering that 'museums are a source and a result of social action' (Kirchberg 2016: 232), this failure seems to have several questions and answers within itself—from the selection of figures labeled as 'Araki' luminaries to the whys and wherefores of the Museum's existence. Ultimately, one has to conclude either that the figures included have been chosen randomly or that the museum deliberately excludes certain individuals. Whatever the real reason behind inclusion and exclusion, this museum alienates visitors, questions identities, conveys inferiority, ignores others' power, undermines others and devalues others' heritage and values, and obliterates their memory.

Moreover, the Museum does not delve deeply enough into its subjects. For instance, Amir Kabir is said to have been a great politician who accomplished several positively remarkable actions. While this description is true, it overlooks less favorable aspects of his character such as his misogyny (Kadivar 2017: 50-51), which the Museum does not address. This is

particularly noteworthy because the museum features only one woman—Parvin Etesami—who was not from Markazi Province but holds a special place in the curriculum of the current educational system. It is noteworthy that Parvin composed a poem celebrating the ‘Unveiling’ initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi.¹³ Although she addresses him indirectly, Parvin’s endorsement of the decree that liberated Iranian women from forced hijab is remarkable and contrasts with the views held by the current Islamic regime. It looks as if a comparison was made between Parvin and Forugh (and perhaps other poetesses), leading to the decision to include only Parvin in the museum, as she did not openly discuss human love or her relationships with men, or criticize the religion. Most of Parvin’s poems are ethical admonitions.

The inclusion and exclusion strategies have a direct impact on the ‘community’ and its experience of visiting the museum. In other words, whether consciously or not, the Museum seems to aim to please a small ‘group’ within a broad ‘community’. Replacing ‘audience’, ‘public’, and ‘visitor’, the term ‘community’ suggests a:

more comprehensive, welcoming, and relevant service that museums are aspiring to create. The concern to make museums relevant to the ‘community’ has swiftly moved to combining museums with some of the key social policy issues, such as tackling exclusion, building cohesive communities, and contributing to community regeneration (Crooke 2006: 170).¹⁴

Concerning the reciprocal relationship between community and the museum, one wonders if the Museum in Arak represents a step toward building a cohesive community and community regeneration, or rather a leap toward its division. In fact, the Museum fails to represent how dynamics of respective communities have led to ‘the formation of identity, the creation of relationships, and definitions of belonging’, which are linked to the meaning of objects in the museum, ‘the use of display as a means to express identity, represent culture, and define nations’ (Crooke 2006: 171). Museums, as ‘production machines’ of historical memory of communities, should no longer represent ‘elite culture’ as they are now expected to ‘perform more complex functions in the social interaction’ (Lysenko and Ignatieva 2023: 2). Jocelyn Dodd and Richard Sandell (2001: 27) have already argued that museums can benefit both individuals and local communities by supporting community capacity building and strengthening skills, confidence, and the ability to change. Through initiatives like the development of museums, communities can become empowered to effect change in their society and the appreciation of multicultural societies. By engaging with local communities, museums gain valuable feedback and insights that support sustainability and relevance, while community members are empowered to discover and actively preserve their heritage for future generations (Jones 2024: 74). A rich society is assessed by the new ideas and thoughts it generates, as these reflect the dialectical nature of culture (Etta, Essien and Ekanem 2022: 180). Nonetheless, in Arak’s museum, we hear only a ‘single “master” narrative’ and not multiple narratives, let alone conflicting ones that would ideally result in ‘more inclusive vision of a community, culture, or place’ (Anderson 2019: 142).

Perhaps another crucial factor contributing to the Museum’s shortcomings is the unclear definition of ‘luminary’. While the individuals whose busts are displayed—whether from Markazi Province or not—are famous, many other significant personalities are ignored, including singers, actors, politicians, and military figures.

Concluding Remarks

After examining the Museum for Luminaries of Markazi Province, one or two suggestion may be warranted. If the CHO insists on maintaining this museum, its policies and strategies should undergo substantial revision. It could begin by clarifying what, when, and where Arak has been, thus establishing clear historical and geographical boundaries for the city. This would entail setting a more accurate time frame. The next point to address would be to define the term ‘luminary’. Any other criteria for excluding individuals have to be dismissed otherwise the museum can no longer expect to be incorporated into people’s lives.

Given the limited space within the museum building, the CHO might consider organizing temporary exhibitions—such as exhibitions for artists, military figures, politicians, and others.

The courtyard and prefabricated materials could effectively serve this purpose.

Another suggestion is to dedicate the building to the late Khakbaz himself. Since the house originally belonged to him, it could showcase his contributions to Arak and the impact he left on the city. This approach would introduce the concept of a historic house, which would significantly alter the Museum's exhibition as it would require furnishings and collections belonged to those who used to live in the house.¹⁵ Consequently, the treatment of the museum site may need to change, potentially leading to a different strategy for the surrounding areas, including the cafés and restaurants. However, two questions must be answered first: 1) To what extent can the original state of the complex be restored? 2) Do any original furniture or collections owned and used by Khakbaz and his household still survive? There seems to be a few pieces, as exhibited in the museum, but if there is nothing else, then they would not be enough, unless other plans are utilized.

Other suggestions would narrow down the scope of the Museum. This does not imply that the Museum would become less interesting, but perhaps quite the opposite. For instance, the Museum can be transformed into a museum for photographs and/or maps of Arak. In addition to a few photographs taken by European travellers, such as George Stevens (see Stevens), Alexandru Balesescu located and digitized two collections of old images of Arak during a pilot project for the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme in 2003.¹⁶ These photos can be reprinted or prepared for digital exhibition in the Museum. Historical maps, created by Iranians and non-Iranians, could form an attractive collection for both experts and the general public.

Notes

- ¹ The CHO later became the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts.
- ² In this writing, I sparsely use special characters for reproducing native pronunciations.
- ³ Clifford Edmond Bosworth, 'Erāq-e 'Ajām(ī)', *Encyclopædia Iranica* 2013. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/eraq-e-ajami>, accessed 26 June 2025; Clifford Edmond Bosworth, Xavier de Planhol, 'Arāk', *Encyclopædia Iranica* 2014. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arak>, accessed 12 April, 2025.
- ⁴ Bosworth and de Planhol, 'Arāk'.
- ⁵ On her life and poetry see: Heshmat Moayyad, 'E' tešāmī, Parvīn', *Encyclopædia Iranica* 2014. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/etesami-parvin>, accessed 01 June 2025.
- ⁶ It is noteworthy that, to date, a few edited volumes (conference proceedings included) have been published in her honor in Arak; e.g., *Proceedings of Conferences in Honor of Eqbal Ashtiyani and Parvin Etesami* 2000; Zolfaqari 2007.
- ⁷ In this article all distances are given as measured in a straight line between two points or places.
- ⁸ For Farrokzad see, for instance: Farzaneh Milani, 'Farroḳzād, Forūḡ-Zamān', *Encyclopædia Iranica* 2017. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farrokhzad-forug-zaman>, accessed 01 June 2025.
- ⁹ William C. Chittick, 'Erāqī, Faḳr-al-Dīn Ebrāhīm', *Encyclopædia Iranica* 2013. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/eraqi>, accessed 05 April 2025.
- ¹⁰ I could not find the engineer's name in any documents I had available to me.
- ¹¹ I am using the term 'ethnography' loosely as the Museum features items that fall outside its scope. Since it is the main museum of Arak, it houses most of the artifacts discovered or confiscated from smugglers within the province.

- ¹² See also: Isa Sadiq, 'Anjoman-e Ātār-e Mellī', Encyclopædia Iranica 2018. <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/anjoman-e-aar-e-melli-aam-the-national-monuments-council-of-iran-established-in-1301-s>, accessed 19 March 2025.
- ¹³ Parvin Etisami, 'زن در ایران' شماره ۱۸۰ - [Number 180 - Women in Iran], Ganjoor [n.d.]. '<https://ganjoor.net/parvin/divanp/mtm/sh180>', accessed 28 January 2026. This poem has been published as no. 118 in her collected works, or no. 180 in some editions.
- ¹⁴ The relationship between the museum and community has been treated in several publications. See, for instance: Watson 2007; Golding and Modest 2013; Brown, Cummins and González Rueda 2024.
- ¹⁵ In addition to the thematic issue of *Museum International* devoted to historic house museums (vol. 53, no. 2, 2001), for this concept see, for instance: Young 2018.
- ¹⁶ British Library, 'Faces and Places in Iran. Iranian photography at the turn of the 20th century (EAP001)' British Library [n.d.]. <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP001>, accessed 05 April 2025.

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***Milad Jahangirfar** holds a BA in Museum Studies, and an MA in Ancient Iranian Languages and Cultures. In 2023, he defended his dissertation entitled Time in Elam: Past, Present, and Future in Middle and Neo-Elamite Royal Inscriptions, and obtained a PhD in Art Research from the University of Art in Tehran. His research interests encompass the history and social roles of museums and collections, Iranian arts, and time and temporal studies.