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Iran and the art of detente

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Beneath a museum in Tehran lies \$3bn worth of western art largely unseen since 1979. That may be about to change



The TMOCA's collection includes work by Toulouse-Lautrec

The vast billboards around Tehran are now fading in the sunlight, the ubiquitous portraits of scowling ayatollahs, the crude graphics proclaiming "Down with the USA", the expansive murals depicting US military scrambling atop a mound of

bleeding Iranian martyrs. They sit at odds with a wakening mood here, a hint of tempered optimism that the lifting of trade sanctions next year could usher in a new era of engagement with the west. It's a situation unthinkable just a few years ago and still barely believed by many in the Iranian capital today.

But this November a small spark of optimism for the future flared as the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA), a state-run institution founded in 1977 by former Empress Farah Pahlavi and her cousin, architect and artist Kamran Diba, opened its doors to a foreign curator and an international entourage of guests for the first time since 1978, signalling the start of what many here believe could be a new era of global collaboration.

As the great and good of the city's art scene assembled to witness the launch of a new exhibition, news broke in the art press of a tentative deal between TMoCA and the German government. The plan is to send 60 artworks from the collection to Berlin's Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) (SPK) for a three-month show in 2017, which would mark TMoCA's first full exhibition overseas.

Over the years there have been rare loans: one of the stars of the collection, Jackson Pollock's "Mural on Indian Red Ground" — estimated by Christie's in 2010 to have a value of \$250m — was lent to a Pollock retrospective in Tokyo in 2012; two magnificent Francis Bacons were also loaned to Edinburgh. Discussions are now also under way to hold a larger show at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC.

The rhetoric flowing between Berlin and Tehran is diplomatically positive. "Whereas images are being destroyed elsewhere in the Middle East," SPK president Hermann Parzinger says, "here they are being brought out of the cellar. That underlines the power of art to civilise and to bring nations together. In holding this exhibition, we also want to help strengthen civil society in Iran."

The museum's collection is the stuff of art-world legend. Estimated to comprise about 1,500 pieces, it's a treasure trove featuring works by Monet, Van Gogh, Pissarro, Renoir, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Magritte, Miró and Braque, rubbing shoulders with Rothko, Pollock, Picasso and Bacon. There are a dozen Jasper Johns works and 15 Warhols. Sporadic foreign press reports over the past couple of decades have estimated the total worth at more than \$3bn.

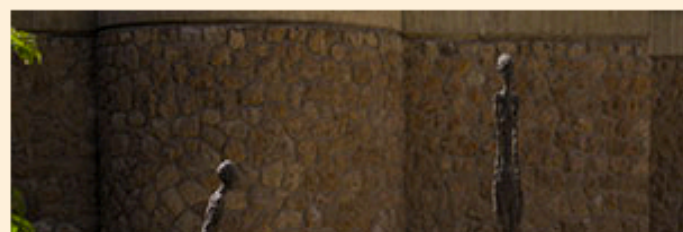
Most of these treasures are permanently in storage, but in recent years more of the western works have been available for the public to see, including a recent, splendid show of the Abstract Expressionists.

Considering the decades of economic chaos in Iran and the near-mythical reputation of the collection in the west, it's something of a miracle that it has remained more or less intact since being spirited into an air-conditioned vault during the mayhem of the 1979 revolution. Some claim it was due to the newly formed Islamic Republic being persuaded that the works belonged to the Iranian people. Others posit that the government simply didn't have the foggiest idea of the value of these paintings, stashed beneath the museum.

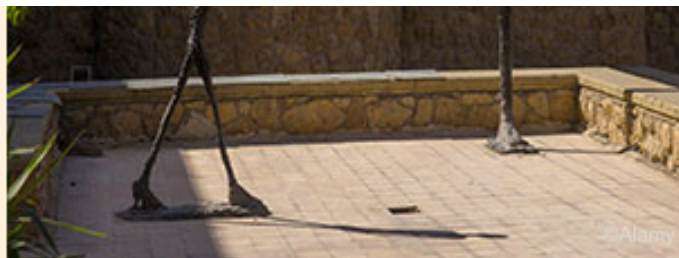
According to TMoCA's current director, Majid Mollanoroozi, offers of huge sums are regularly received for such star works as Renoir's "Gabrielle With Open Blouse" (1907), Picasso's 45-sq-ft masterpiece, "The Painter and His Model" (1927), and Gauguin's "Still Life with Japanese Woodcut" (1889), worth an estimated \$45m.



Farah Pahlavi, former empress of Iran, with Andy Warhol, c1976



Yet only a single work has ever been sold to the west, a Willem de Kooning nude that went to the Houghton family in the US in 1994 in a complicated, semi-clandestine exchange arrangement. The



Giacometti sculptures at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art

Iranians wanted a famous Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Shah Tahmasp, a set of magnificent 400-year-old miniatures that was in the possession of the Houghtons. The latter sold the de Kooning to David Geffen for an estimated \$20m; he in turn sold it on in 2006 to hedge fund magnate Steven Cohen for \$137.5m.

The collection was gathered during the 1970s by Empress Farah Diba Pahlavi, who had studied architecture in Paris, and her cousin, TMOCA founder and inaugural director, Kamran Diba. It was intended to be the Middle East's foremost collection of 20th-century western art. Diba, an architect who had studied in the US, dreamt of a museum in his homeland with a collection that reflected the very best in postwar American and European art, alongside a parallel assortment of modern and contemporary Iranian art.

Following his return to Iran in 1966 and after years of planning and delays, the Empress allocated Diba a generous budget — Iran was awash with oil-generated cash — to assemble his collection. Two western curators, David Galloway and Donna Stein, were retained to assist in assembling the collection.

“When we started, my plan was not to have a museum of modern art. I wanted contemporary art,” Diba recalls. “Of course I knew that contemporary means you have to have some masters of the [early] 20th century, but not an extensive amount. When I became the director, I basically bought mostly postwar American collections.”

Emblematic of much of what revolutionaries came to loathe about the pro-western Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the collection reflected the tastes of Iran's intellectual elite, in thrall to work by US and European masters across Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstraction and



Calder mobiles

Pop.

At the opening of TMoCA in 1977 Diba made an impassioned speech which included the line, "This Museum must be like a bulldozer . . . to clear the way for more open and adventurous artistic values." Sadly, barely two years later, Diba was in exile in Paris and the museum's collection placed in storage.



The museum in 1978

But on a chilly evening last month, a crowd gathered at the TMoCA buildings in the heart of downtown Tehran for the opening of a retrospective on the life of the late, celebrated Iranian artist Farideh Lashai. Among those assembled were local artists, collectors, patrons and curators, alongside, for the first time in more than 30 years, a group of international guests organised by the Farideh Lashai Foundation. And no less eminent a figure than Ali Jannati,

minister for culture, appeared, to launch the show and talk of a rapprochement with the west through art. "This is a first step," he said. "We hope to have more mutual co-operation to showcase outstanding Iranian artists as well as displaying more works from our foreign art collection."

Whether the museum's groundbreaking rapprochement with the west signals a wider Iranian shift towards cultural re-engagement remains to be seen. But as the museum announced a follow-up exhibition with Belgian artist Wim Delvoye and the potential link-ups with Berlin and Washington DC, momentarily, it seemed as if anything could be possible.

But there is still a mood of well-worn scepticism. "I'll believe it when I see it," a chador-clad local journalist whispers to me. "For every liberalising move like this, the conservatives will get mad and want to take something back. So, this being Iran, you can only count on the fact that nothing will go as planned."

tmoca.com

Photographs: Office of Kamran Diba; Farah Pahlavi Foundation; Alamy; EPA