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New book lifts lid on Mohammed Afkhami's Iranian contemporary art collection

Financier says that an exhibition of his holdings in Toronto could travel to Houston

by GARETH HARRIS | 26 April 2017



Shiva Ahmadi's Hades (2010) (Courtesy Shiva Ahmadi and Leila Heller Gallery, New York)

A new book out next month will lift the lid on a major contemporary Iranian art collection amassed by a Middle Eastern financier, reflecting also the trajectory of the country's art from the 1950s to today.

The book, titled *Honar* ('art' in Farsi) and published by Phaidon, features 250 works from the collection of Mohammed Afkhami. It includes a joint essay by Venetia Porter, the assistant keeper of Islamic and contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum in London, and Sussan Babaie, lecturer in the arts of Iran and Islam at London's Courtauld Institute of Art.

Their thesis delves into Afkhami's family history, highlighting that his paternal great-grandmother, Effat al-Muluk Khwajeh Nouri, was the first female artist in Iran to set up a private painting school for girls. And his maternal grandfather, Mohammad Ali Massoudi, compiled one of the most significant private collections of calligraphy in Iran

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(some examples were exhibited in 1978 at the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran, founded in 1977 under the auspices of Queen Farah Pahlavi).



Mitra Tabrizian's *City, London* (2008) (Courtesy Mitra Tabrizian)

The Swiss-born Afkhami divides his time between Dubai, Switzerland and London. He spent his childhood in Tehran, but his mother left Iran after the revolution in 1979. He began buying art in 2004. His collection of around 400 mainly Iranian contemporary works includes artists such as Mohammad Ehsai, Shirin Neshat, Shiva Ahmadi and Timo Nasseri. “I have no plans to open a museum,” he says. “It’s more beneficial to loan works to institutions.”

Afkhami is in talks for a touring show of works drawn from his collection, currently at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada (until 4 June), to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The exhibition, titled *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians*, includes works by 23 artists.

The show includes Farhad Moshiri’s *Flying Carpet* (2007)—a digital fighter jet made from 32 stacked Persian carpets. There is also a 2m-high sculpture by Parviz Tanavoli, *Blue Heech* (2005), and the late photographer and Palme d’Or-winning film-maker Abbas Kiarostami’s *Untitled*, from the *Snow White Series* triptych (2010). Pieces by Shirin Neshat and Monir Farmanfarmaian are also included.