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Culture clubs

By Liz Bolshaw



Art and minds: Magic of Persia

We are not like the Red Cross. We don't send blankets," says Shirley Elghanian, founder of Magic of Persia, a London-based charity that promotes contemporary Iranian art in the west.

While some Iranian philanthropists do support humanitarian causes, the diaspora has rallied to the cause of promoting Persian art and culture in the west, from the oldest antiquities to the newest video installations by young artists in downtown Tehran.

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Charles Melville, professor of Persian history at the University of Cambridge, for one, is grateful. "Not only do Iranians have a great culture, but they are very proud of it," he says. Melville's Pembroke College has recently received a £1.2m endowment from Bita Daryabari, an American-Iranian philanthropist, to support the Shahnama Project, a study and translation of the seventh-century 50,000-verse epic poem. "It is a great work of literature, but it is much more than that: it is a symbol and versified history that explains what good rulership should be," Melville says.

Principles of good governance, now championed by western governments, have Persian, as much as

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ancient Greek, origins. The Cyrus Cylinder (539BC), on loan from the British Museum and on a maiden tour of five US museums, carries an early declaration in cuneiform of religious tolerance and human rights. Iranian philanthropic dollars poured into the Iran Heritage Foundation America to finance the tour.

High-profile cultural events may be dollar magnets, but the less glitzy work of supporting scholarship is harder to finance. In UK universities – even those as well endowed as Cambridge – private patronage is the white knight in a landscape abandoned by public funding. “If someone says, ‘I want to learn Persian,’” says Melville, “you need someone in a decent university like Cambridge with the resources, library and expertise to deliver it.”

US-Iranian philanthropic effort directed towards projects in Iran is severely curbed by US sanctions that have been in force since 1996. Cash donations are prohibited, except through licences issued by the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control.

Khosrow Semnani, an Iranian-born nuclear waste entrepreneur and philanthropist, hopes recent overtures by Iran president [Hassan Rouhani](#) may herald a thaw in the US-Iran permafrost and eventually “philanthropic work that can be delivered to Iran”.

Semnani’s family foundation has supported Romanian orphans, a large-scale measles vaccination programme in Africa, projects in Guatemala, Indonesia and a health centre in his adoptive home town of Salt Lake City.

But even the best philanthropy is no substitute for good governance, says Nosheen Hashemi, a former executive at technology company Oracle and independent software investor turned philanthropist. She founded the Hand Foundation and the Parsa Community Fund to promote “leadership development” and to support “Iranian arts and culture”.

In spite of the US sanctions, there are some western-sponsored humanitarian causes working directly in Iran. The London-based Omid Foundation offers education and support to young women in Tehran aged 18-25 who have been the victims of abuse. It has an OFAC licence, but sanctions have hampered the charity’s ability to raise funds in the US. “American-Iranians are scared to do anything that is in Iran,” says founder Marjaneh Halati. She is working with disadvantaged young women because “they are in the periphery of Iran – no one gives a damn”.



Nadia Parvani, a photographer who has been supported by the Omid Foundation

The next generation was also an inspiration for Magic of Persia, but in Elghanian's case it was to help her children, and others like them, learn more about their Iranian roots. The charity stages a high-profile contemporary art prize, Mopcap, whose winners hang in public collections from Tehran to New York. Tate Modern, the London gallery, acquired the first Mopcap winner and then staged a solo exhibition of work by the artist Mahmoud Bakhshi during last year's London Olympics.

Magic of Persia launched its first auction of contemporary Iranian art in Dubai partly, says Elghanian, because she has "a very special relationship" with Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan (head of the United Arab Emirates' ministry of culture, youth and social development) and because of geography. "The shipping cost is what usually breaks our backs," she says.

Iranian contemporary art has come of age. Artists such as [YZ Kami](#), [Shirin Neshat](#) and [Shirazeh Houshiary](#) can be found in public and private contemporary art collections around the world. Parviz Tanavoli's sculpture "Oh Persepolis II" fetched \$940,000 at Dubai Christie's a few months ago.

Galleries such as The Third Line and Isabelle van den Eynde in Dubai, Rose Issa, Rossi & Rossi, Kashya Hildebrand and Bischoff Weiss in London, and Leila Heller, Taymour Grahne and Shirin in New York regularly show contemporary Iranian work. Iran Modern, showing at the Asia Society in New York, runs until January 5.

With these levels of commercial success, it is tempting to question the need for charitable support. "The censorship in Iran is what warrants us to be this platform," says Elghanian. Some artists are "very brave" and as a result are not able to return to Iran. Brothers Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, for example, produce provocative work owned by collectors such as British advertising man Charles Saatchi and François-Henri Pinault, the French luxury goods tycoon, but they effectively live in exile in Dubai.

For every star, Elghanian says, there are hundreds of unknown artists whose work appears in the charity's silent auctions.

"It is not just about exposing the west to Iranian contemporary arts," she says. "It is about the Iranian artist being exposed to the outside world."

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