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I cover conflicts, frontiers and upheavals mired in history.

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We've Tried War, Politics, Money, Religion - Let Us Support Those Who Try Culture

The ongoing thaw in relations with Iran has made me think of how much culture and the arts can make a pivotal difference.

Almost ten years ago, I reviewed a British Post-War sculpture show at the MOCA in Tehran. I remember the place packed with visitors, many eager to chat and tell me of their pride that Iran could host such events. Maybe it can again.

Meantime, it falls to us in the West to keep relations alive with such people by airing their cultural expressions in New York, London and elsewhere. In New York of late a spate of shows around Iranian contemporary art has led the way. But I get ahead of myself.

For several years, I also covered the Iraq war for the [Wall Street Journal](#) mostly from a cultural perspective, perhaps the only journalist to view



English: "Cube Light" by chinese artist Ai Weiwei, 2008 Exhibition "So Sorry", Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

such conflicts specifically through that filter: the symphony orchestra, the last open art gallery, filmmaking in Baghdad etc. I often found myself confronted by sincere, exasperated Baghdadi intellectuals who potentially welcomed Western intervention – except for a hugely significant problem. I was often asked, “why do Americans bring us support for politics and religion, which just causes frictions, but nothing for culture? Where is your human face – where the filmmakers, musicians, writers, poets, thinkers, academics?” They cited even the old Soviet influence as preferable overall because the Soviets fostered culture, albeit by diktat. And, indeed, over the years I have agonized over this question: what it meant that we exported our principles of politics and business, that we encouraged identity politics via freedom of religious expression and yet we had nothing to say about culture. And I have come to understand that we neglected – are neglecting – actually the most important and humane of all the deployable mechanisms for stabilizing troubled countries.

Now you might argue that American culture sells itself, indeed too much so, when practically everything on global video and audio has devolved from American popular entertainment. And there’s the rub. For in asking that question, none of my interlocutors meant ‘entertainment’. We may have lost the ability to distinguish between culture and entertainment but they have not. They are talking about ideas that go deep, to the level of civilizational roots. And to that end, one can see that some of the Gulf states while at times supporting jihadi ideologues abroad are actually importing cultural ideas and exhibitions, building institutions, franchising western museums and the like into their midst. They understand well enough what induces stability and enlightenment at home. The Dubai Art Fair and the Abu Dhabi Louvre are good examples, but there are others aplenty. The fact is when you empower culture, and its practitioners, in any society but especially in societies that tend towards isolation you empower the class that spreads ideas and does so broadly. In supporting that class you are supporting them against their enemy and ours – the enemy being anti-culturalists, those that prefer influence through narrow, populist, incendiary dogmas. By attending to culture, you are implicitly saying that you care about a country’s populace as sentient intellects worthy of sharing our finest impulses. They can take it or leave it, but at least they know you care enough to engage at that level.

Conversely, we should hold up as paradigms among us any who foster the most receptive, courageous minds from potentially hostile places, experimentalist minds, artists, thinkers who add to our ideas or to their culture's from ours. We should celebrate not just the artists, but a fortiori those who present them to us. In New York, we've seen a wave of Iranian contemporary art exhibitions at several galleries. The new Taymour Grahne and Shirin galleries, Leila Heller's longstanding gallery, and that of Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, have all done resplendent, probing shows. Among them, Ethan Cohen represents a kind of exemplar in the field, starting with Chinese contemporary art back in the late 1980's.

Ethan's father, Prof Jerome Cohen, virtually invented the field of Chinese Law study at Harvard during the darkest Maoist times. He advised Kissinger on the great opening to China. He still helps legally defend beleaguered Chinese dissidents in their homeland, yet he's also hugely respected by the authorities in Beijing for his good-faith engagement with their country down the decades.

Meanwhile, Ethan Cohen went on to pioneer the West's exposure to Chinese contemporary artists. He early befriended Ai Weiwei and was the first to introduce him to US art lovers. They have remained friends all this time. But Ethan began at a juncture when no one thought of China in the same frame as contemporary art. Buddhist art, yes, literati art, calligraphy, social realism, apple-cheeked folkloric art, yes, but not challenging relevant art. One can plausibly argue that the West first took China's contemporary artists seriously – before the Chinese did – and that Ethan launched that revolution. He has since diversified, like others, into global genres and his current show is entitled "Iran Art Now".

One might think that a New York Jewish gallerist in Manhattan would be the last person to provide a platform for Iranian artists. But what's needed is exactly that kind of cultural overture, one that creates paths across the no-man's-land of mutual suspicion, sets examples and dismantles barricades. Politics, religion, money – we've tried those channels. We've reaped division and distrust. Let us unleash cultural creativity for a change. Let us, above all, praise those who take the risk and make it happen.