

## Persian Calligraphy Opens a Door to Modern Art

By NINA SIEGAL

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Like many children of her generation growing up in [Iran](#), Poursan Jinchi, 53, learned the ancient art of Persian calligraphy in school. Unlike most children of her generation, when she moved to the United States, she did not leave that education behind.



Robin Holland

Poursan Jinchi

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Her parents sent her to George Washington University, in Washington, to train as an engineer, but she chose to become an artist instead. Her drawings and paintings were abstract works based on script forms that, to an American eye, most closely resemble cursive jottings or musical notes.

“In the beginning, it was totally foreign to people around me,” Ms. Jinchi said of her art. “My teachers were quite surprised with my style, and they couldn’t make any comments because they didn’t know enough about it even to make comments. So I thought, ‘Good, they won’t give me their two cents. I can be left alone.’”

That was the case for all of her teachers except one, she said. Rudolf Baranik, an artist of the midcentury New York School who was her instructor at the Art Students League of New York, described her work as “Islam invaded the Abstract Expressionists.” She is still not sure whether that was a positive or negative critique, but she did not forget it.

Still, she had little success selling her paintings. “Only friends used to buy my work,” she said, “and those were really nice friends trying to be supportive.”

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Adam Reich/Courtesy of Pouran Jinchi

Prayer stones made with baked clay and lacquer paint by Pouran Jinchi, an artist who was born in Iran and now lives in New York City.

All that changed in 2007 when Ms. Jinchi was picked up by the Third Line Gallery in [Dubai](#). She also exhibited that year at Art Dubai, an international art fair that drew worldwide attention to the growing gallery scene in the United Arab Emirates. The previous year, [Christie's](#) had opened a salesroom in Dubai, focused on contemporary

and modern art.

Collectors and curators from the region quickly took an interest in Ms. Jinchi's particular mixture of Eastern and Western influences. In 2008, the Third Line presented her first solo show. Since then, her work has been selling steadily to private collectors and international institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Brooklyn Museum, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and, in March this year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Laila Binbrek, the director of the Third Line, said Ms. Jinchi's crosscultural works were particularly appealing to curators and collectors.

"She's taken something that's normally associated with a traditional, old-as-time practice of Asia and the Middle East," Ms. Binbrek said, "and she's re-explored it and taken it apart and reused it to create work that is very modern and still has the essence of history behind it."

The earliest Persian script is thought to have been invented 500 or 600 years before the Christian era. Together with later scripts, it is one of the most revered aspects of early Persian culture. Contemporary calligraphic artists, like Ms. Jinchi, use script not as language but as a starting point for visual abstractions.

"Sometimes her work becomes so abstracted that you no longer see it as calligraphy," Ms. Binbrek said. "You see it more as markings or repetitive patterns. She's deconstructed the structure of the text so that it's more about form, and in that case it's following modes of abstraction and minimalism."

Dina Nasser-Khadivi, an independent art adviser in Geneva who specializes in modern and contemporary Iranian art, said Ms. Jinchi's story pointed to a growing interest in the work of contemporary Iranian artists.

For a long time, Ms. Nasser-Khadivi wrote in an e-mail, Iranian art was "secluded and limited to the local audience in Tehran" until Christie's sales in Dubai began, exposing Iranian artists to the international art market.

Now, she said, they are represented by galleries in London, New York and Paris, as well as Dubai.

Western museums are now showing substantial interest in contemporary work by Iranian artists, Ms. Nasser-Khadivi added, pointing to institutions like the Met, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Tate Modern, in London.

The Tate has recently formed an acquisitions committee dedicated to the Middle East and North Africa.

The growing interest in Iranian artists has translated into a steady stream of shows for Ms. Jinchi. Her work can be seen at FIAC, the Paris international contemporary art fair, opening today; at Abu Dhabi Art next month; and at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in February.

“I’ve been exhibiting pretty much nonstop since this whole Dubai thing happened,” Ms. Jinchi said over the phone from her studio in New York. “That’s had a big influence on my exhibiting not only there, but also here in the U.S.”

Ms. Jinchi said she was not surprised that her work finally found an audience — only that it took so long.

“Westerners have been interested in Japanese and Chinese calligraphy for many years, since [World War II](#),” she said. “But there was no interest in Persian or Arabic calligraphy because they didn’t have any exposure to it.

“The fact of having a couple of wars in the Middle East, and having more exposure to Islamic culture, made Westerners more interested in the art forms. I think it’s sad that it takes a war to become interested in other peoples’ culture, but that’s often the case.”

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