Modern and Contemporary Art in Iran

The modern art movement in Iran had its genesis in the late 1940s and early '50s. Politically, these were the years that saw the abdication of Reza Shah and increased contact with the West. Artistically, this was the period after the death of painter Kamal al-Mulk (1852–1940) and thus symbolically the end of a rigid adherence to academic painting. The culmination of these events allowed for a questioning of authority and resulted in the creation of a group of artists dedicated to creating a uniquely Iranian, modern idiom.

One site for change was at the College of Fine Arts, then under the direction of André Godard. Graduates of the school were taught in a manner radically different than in Kamal al-Mulk's Academy of Fine Arts, and were encouraged as innovators rather than copyists. At the time it opened, Kamal al-Mulk's school was highly regarded, but it is now criticized for a dogged devotion to an academic style of painting long after its renunciation in Europe.

The 1949 opening of the Apadana gallery in Tehran, and the emergence of artists like Marcos Grigorian (born 1925) in the 1950s, signaled a commitment to the creation of a form of modern art grounded in Iran. Grigorian himself was interested in popular art, and especially the type of paintings created to accompany storytelling in coffeehouses. He commissioned and displayed such paintings, but in his own work he preferred a style that referred to the desert, indigenous dwellings, and their visual vocabulary of parched earth and mud.

Grigorian's student Hussein Zenderoudi (born 1937) also found inspiration in popular culture, but looked instead to the forms and aesthetics of objects made for lay worship—talismans, printed prayers, and the hand of Fatima. In a review of Zenderoudi's work, the scholar Karim Emami likened his art to the kind of objects found in *saqqakhanas*, the public water fountains erected in memory of the Shiʿi martyrs of Karbala which were sites for personal prayer. This term was then applied to a group of artists who, though not formally affiliated, all borrowed from the Iranian past and a certain popular aesthetic. This group included Parviz Tanavoli (born 1937) and Siah Armajani (born 1939). In Tanavoli's work, the motifs of cuneiform and the grillwork of the *saqqakhana* windows appear in sculpture, paintings, and rugs as he worked through each of these media. Later, in reaction to the art world's hype of the *saqqakhana* school, Tanavoli produced a series of works incorporating the word *heech*, Persian for "nothingness." Armajani has spent the major part of his artistic career studying, researching, and developing public art projects. His written manifestoes and his art, which includes designs and constructed projects, have been instrumental in shaping the very concept of public art in the United States. From 1958 to 1964, however, he produced a series of calligraphic works. Using a variety of media, he covered entire surfaces with minute poetic verses in Persian to convey social criticism. As seen in *Shirt*, these works often contain waves of inscriptions flowing in different directions.

The highly active 1950s were followed by the equally spirited 1960s and '70s. These decades saw the opening of Iran to the international art scene, as local artists participated in art fairs, founded galleries, and courted foreign collectors. In 1977, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art opened, boasting an important collection of both Western and Iranian artists. In these years, Mohammad Ehsai (born 1939) continued the experiments with calligraphy the *saqqakhana* artists had initiated, abstracting the letters and experimenting with techniques of modern painting.

The 1979 Revolution changed the dynamics of the arts scene. The Revolution itself was documented by the photographer Abbas (born 1944), who had just returned to Iran for a project to examine changes in society brought by Iran's oil boom. Caught in the moment, he recorded both the fervent demonstrations of the masses and the dealings of the higher level politicians.

After the takeover by the Islamic government, museums and galleries enjoyed less latitude than they had in previous years. Art of this period is dominated by Iran's war with Iraq (1980–88), and the responses of many artists to its

horrors. Sadegh Tirafkan (born 1965) completed a series of photographs in memory of the many friends who died in the war. The war also fostered a certain development in the graphic arts, as stark, powerful posters were created to galvanize national support and to commemorate the many lives lost. Tirafkan's other photographs explore his relationship as an Iranian male with his country's ancient past. The most recent is a series based in Persepolis.

The late 1990s has witnessed a spurt of artistic activity, with many artists like Farah Ossuli (born 1953) working in Iran now. She has chosen the medium of Persian miniature painting as the point of departure for her art. In her paintings, Ossuli replaces the spaces for text with fields of color and manipulates the scale of the figures, many of which are women. She appropriates the language of miniature painting, yet re-presents it in a contemporary idiom. Ossuli says the following about her work: "Miniaturists say that being a contemporary miniaturist means being a magician, someone who can do incredible things, be rigorous, work five years on a painting, or be able to draw a line that is invisible. But I want to make visible that which is unsaid, and I take only a reasonable pain in creating my works. So, I am definitely not a miniaturist."

There are also a number of Iranians working outside the country, who represent the generation caught in the crossfire of the Revolution. Many are students who had left Iran to pursue a higher education in other countries and who were away during the Revolution and sometimes not permitted to return for many years. Shirazeh Houshiary (born 1955), who has settled in London, and Shirin Neshat (born 1957), who lives in New York, are two such artists. Houshiary's early works are patinated metal sculptures based on Islamic geometric forms. Her more recent works are monochrome paintings, which appear to be blank canvases in white or black when viewed from a distance, but a complex web of intricately etched markings in graphite when viewed up close. These works are elusive and sometimes barely visible, suggesting a quest for the self in physical form. They encapsulate the essence of human presence—the breath. On a mystical level, Houshiary's works can be interpreted as a metaphor for Divine light and man's eternal search for union with the Divine.

Neshat's work grapples with issues of exile and identity and reflects her attempts to cope with the changes in the country from which she felt so alienated. In the *Women of Allah* series (1997.129.8)and in her more recent video installations, poetic texts cover the body parts of women. Her works contain a strong poetic and lyrical element, although they address "forbidden" subjects such as Islam, revolution, women, femininity, and violence. It is the juxtaposition of conflicting and dissonant elements such as the veil and the gun that makes Neshat's work so compelling. She is a master of video installation. One of her most recent works is inspired by the novel *Women Without Men* by Shahrnoush Parsipour and the story of the Tooba tree in the Holy Qur'an. Here, Neshat uses the tree as a metaphor for a spiritual longing for paradise and a quest for political power, drawing on her cultural heritage to create works that resonate with universal ideas such as loss, meaning, and memory.

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Further Reading

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