NEWS WEB EXCLUSIVE

The Other Modernism: Rediscovering Iran's Avant-Garde

BY ***Robin Cembalest*** POSTED 02/07/13

Overshadowed by revolution, sanctions, and outdated notions of the Modern, Iran's vibrant postwar art scene is coming into focus at the Asia Society

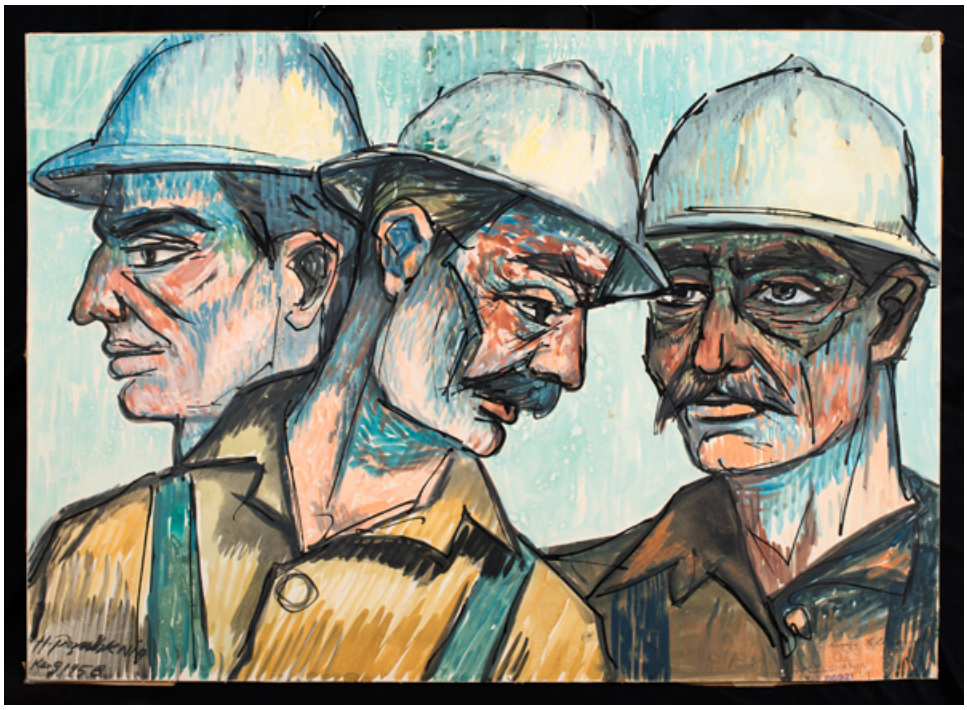
Back in the 20th century, everyone was talking about how New York had wrested the status of modern-art capital from Paris. Nowadays, curators in the U.S. and Europe are vying to share the spotlight.

Shows this season at MoMA and the Guggenheim explore Japan's postwar avant-garde. The Rubin is doing Indian Modernism, Part 3. In Madrid, the Reina Sofía has Latin American abstraction from the '30s to the '70s, part of a multifaceted collaboration with the Cisneros Foundation that launched with a conference on Latin American modernisms. And this summer in London, Tate Modern will open a retrospective of Sudan-born painter Ibrahim El-Salahi; this too is part of a larger initiative to globalize art history.

Amidst these efforts, Iran has remained the Other Other Modernism. Although Iran was very much part of the conversation in the postwar era, when its artists studied abroad, traveled freely, and gallery-hopped at home, the Islamic Revolution moved the conversation elsewhere. Aside from NYU's Grey Art Gallery, whose founder, Abby Weed Grey, purchased hundreds of Iranian modernist works during the '60s and '70s, few U.S. institutions have committed to exploring the diverse, hybrid, idiosyncratic productions of prerevolutionary Iran.

"There was this kind of blind spot," says Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum in New York, who describes the era as transitional, influential, and overlooked. In September the museum hopes to change the equation with "Iran Modern," an international loan show uniting more than 100 objects from the '50s to the '70s. Curated by Fereshteh Daftari and Layla Diba, it's the most ambitious survey of Iran's prerevolutionary art to be staged outside Iran. Spread over two floors of the museum, the exhibition will explore the ways these lesser-known Middle Eastern modernists forged their own version of an international style, borrowing liberally from Western-art traditions as they inventively updated their own.

Earlier European modernism was a strong influence on Houshang Pezeshknia, who depicted oil workers on the island of Khark in this 1958 portrait.

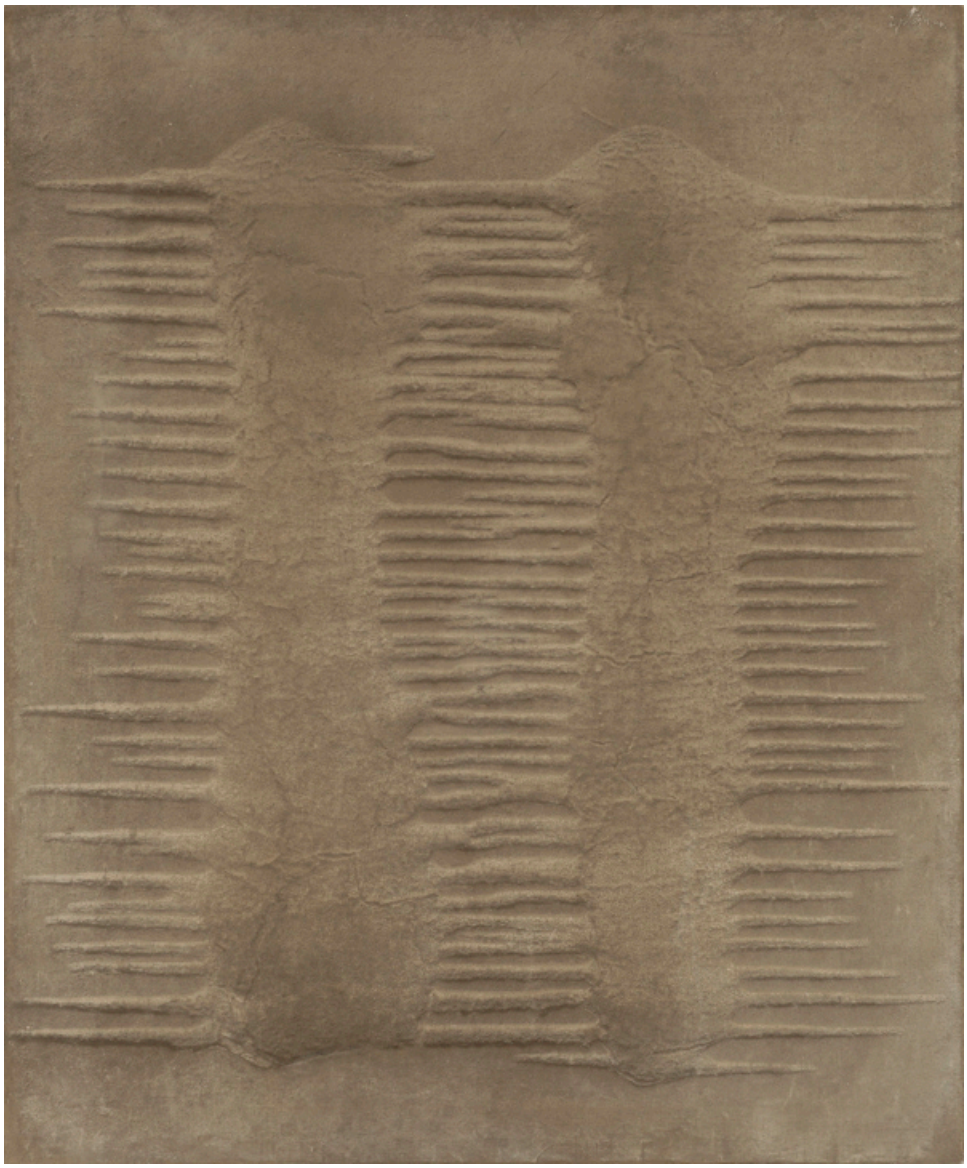


Houshang Pezeshknia, *Khark*, 1958.

BABAK PEZESHKNIA COLLECTION.

With their multi-hyphenated addresses; habit of changing hats as artist, curator, and art impresario; and tendency to sample from across the style spectrum, the Iranian modernists might have more in common with today's global avant-garde than the fabled New York School did.

Marcos Grigorian, for example, a Russian-born artist (and actor), studied in Rome, ran several Tehran galleries in the late '40s and early '50s, organized the first Tehran Biennial in 1958, and opened the Universal Galleries in Minneapolis in the early '60s. Like most of Iran's artists he developed a practice at once global and local. Using humble materials like sand and enamel, in common with Europeans like the *arte povera* artists and Tàpies, he created textured abstractions that also read as renderings of the desert.

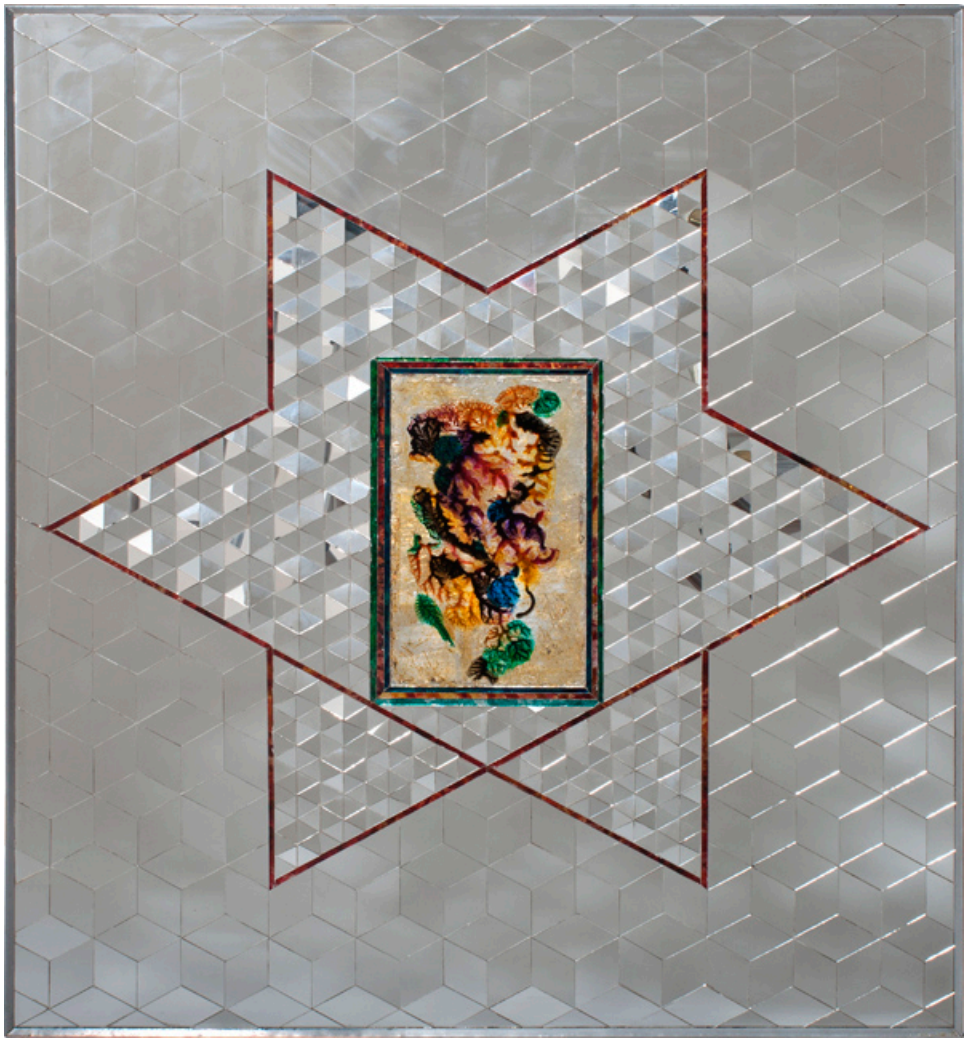


Marcos Grigorian, *Untitled*, n.d.

GREY ART GALLERY, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION. GIFT OF ABBY WEED GREY, G1927.570.

The techniques and iconography of Islamic, pre-Islamic, and folk art were all fodder for Iran's modern artists. Mirror mosaics and reverse mirror painting inspired Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, who took classes at Cornell and Parsons, befriended the Abstract Expressionists, studied with Milton Avery, and collaborated with Warhol.

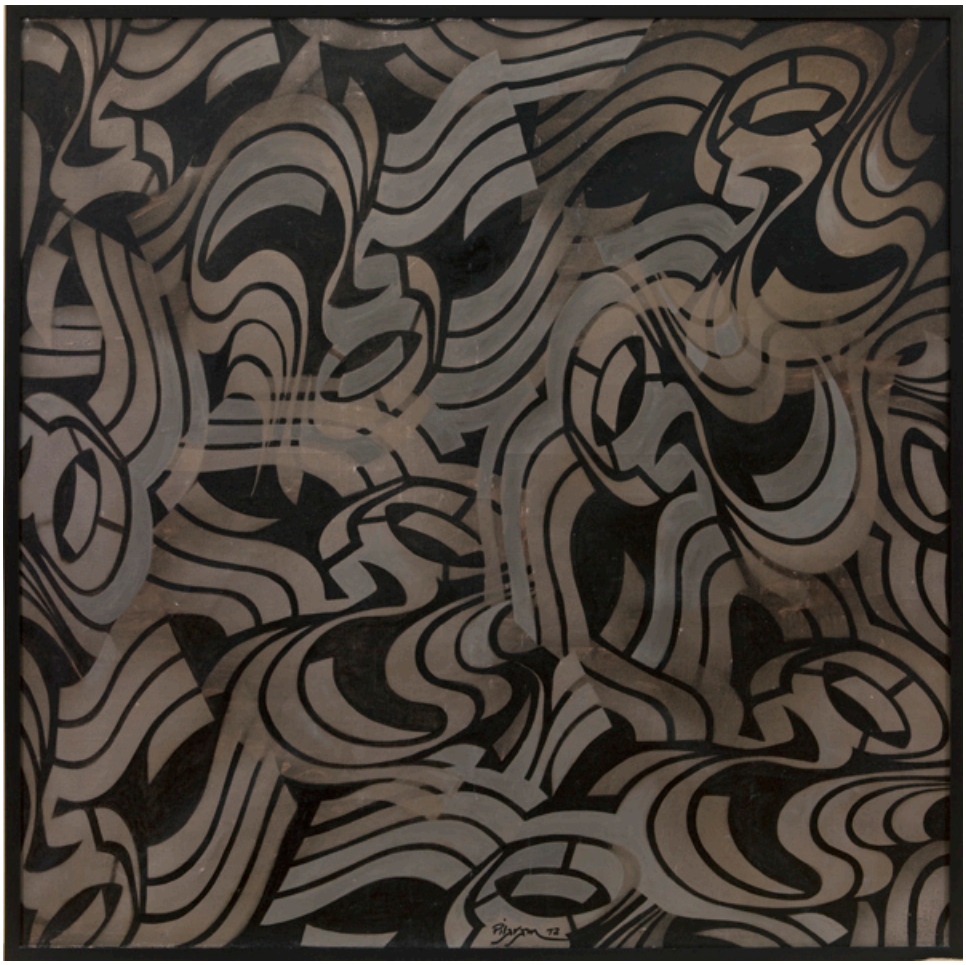
Seeing the Shah Cheragh Shrine in Shiraz, which she visited with Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif in 1966, was transformative for Farmanfarmaian, who in this untitled work from the mid-'70s infuses traditional forms with geometric and gestural abstraction.



Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, *Untitled*, c. 1975–1976.

PRIVATE COLLECTION.

Classic miniature painting and Persian calligraphy were raw materials for a number of artists who, with a mixture of reverence and irreverence, transformed traditional, elegant letters into nonsensical writing. In a 1972 work by Faramarz Pilaram, the dancerly forms are just that–they never resolve into readable text.

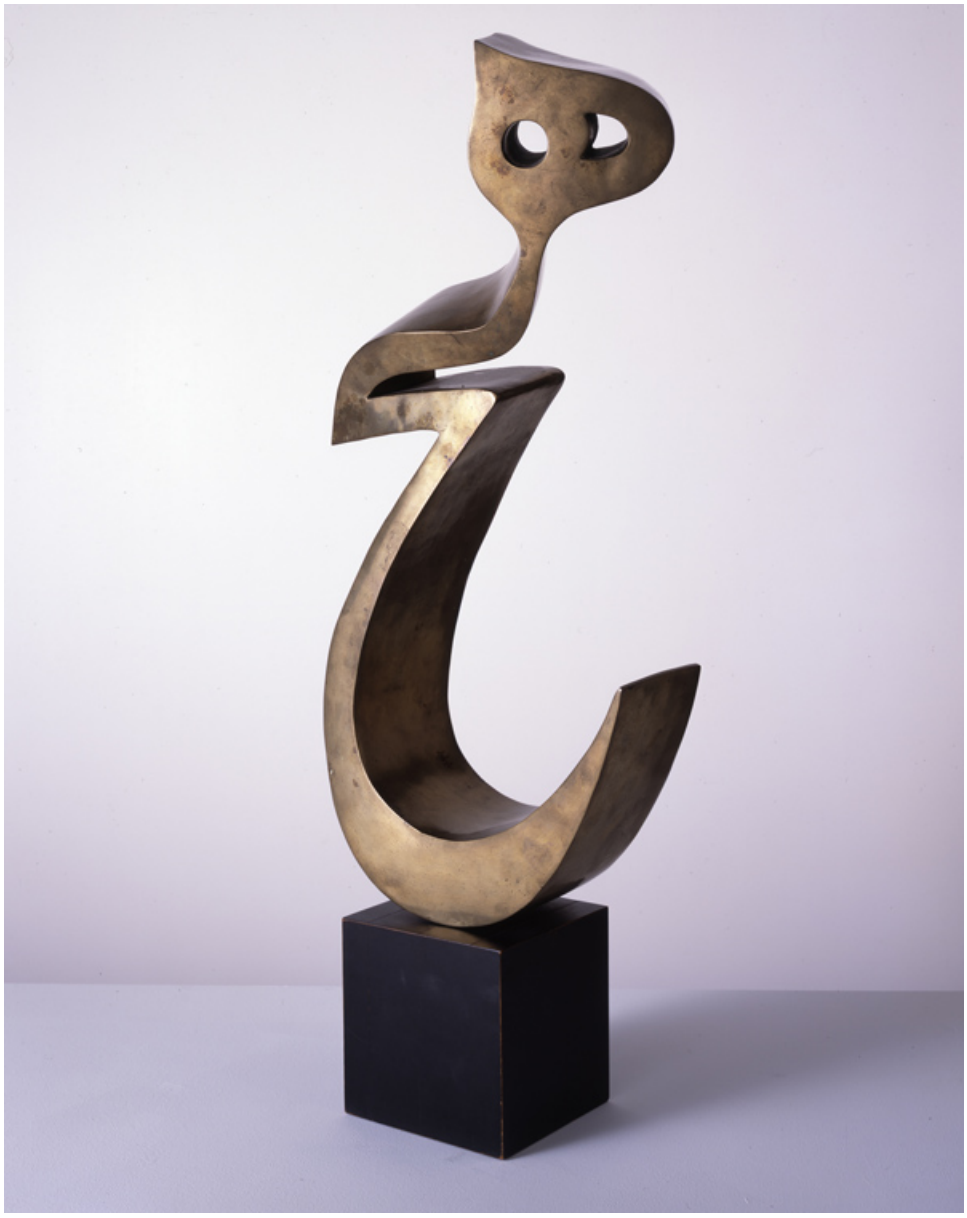


Faramarz Pilaram, *Untitled*, 1972.

HOUMAN M. SARSHAR COLLECTION, NEW YORK.

"Nothing" has been the lifetime theme of Parviz Tanavoli, who has incorporated the word *Heech*, meaning "nothingness" in Persian, in his work since 1964. This 1972 sculpture might be seen as mocking other artists' calligraphic explorations as trivial—or not. "*Heech* remains open to interpretation," Daftari says. "It can be seen as an existential statement or a political expression reducing grand official rhetoric to 'nothing.' "

This is one of 80 works by the artist acquired by Abby Weed Grey, who met Tanavoli at the second Tehran Biennial and became a longtime friend and patron. Her Iranian, Indian, and Turkish holdings became the basis of the Grey Art Gallery's collection.



Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech (Nothing)*, 1972.

GREY ART GALLERY, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY ART COLLECTION. GIFT OF ABBY WEED GREY, G1975.54.

Using grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Dedalus Foundation, among others, the Asia Society has been organizing loans from public and private collections in Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East—except, of course, Iran.

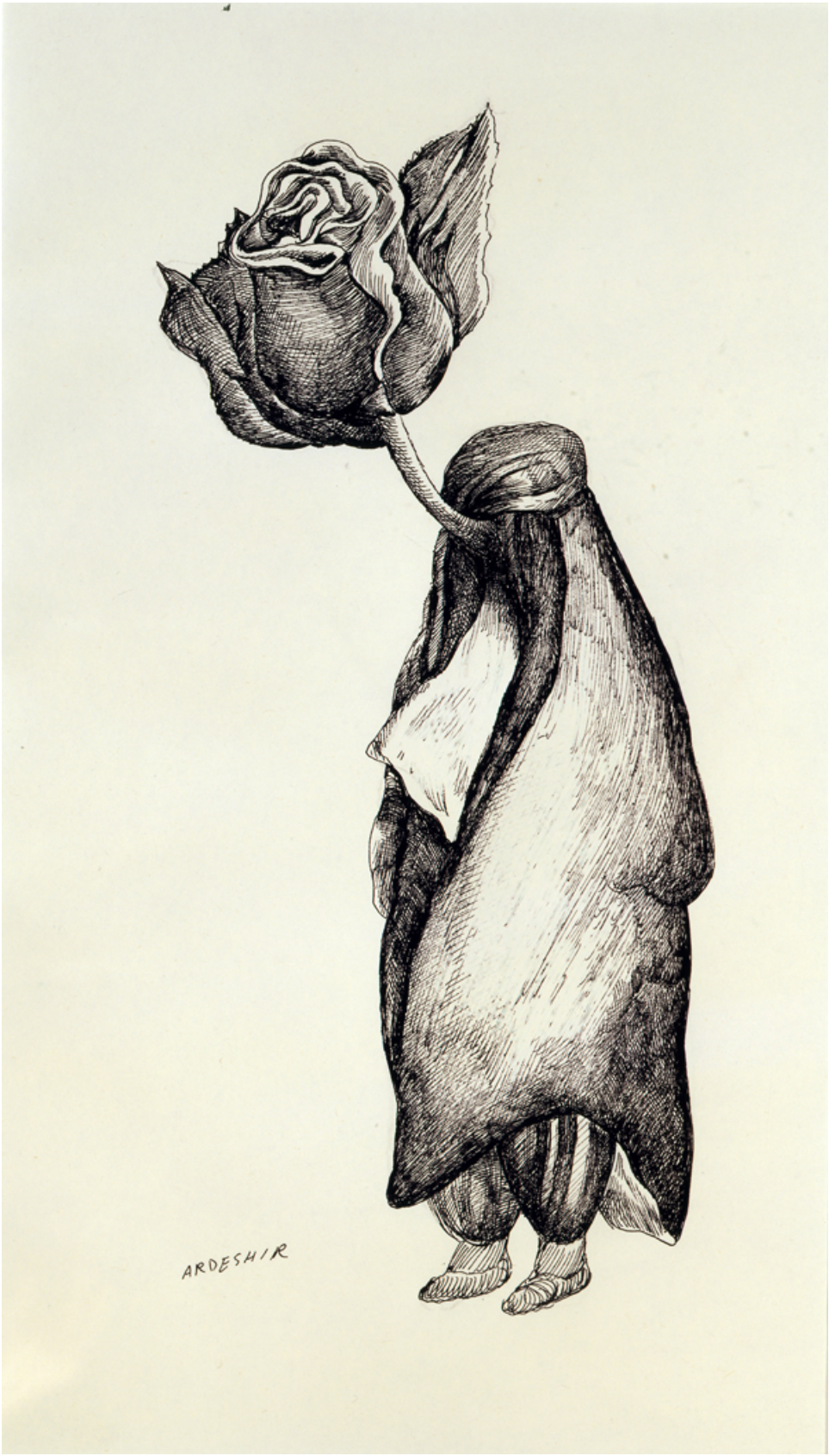
Working around the restriction of U.S. sanctions against Iran became in a sense a "curatorial principle," says Diba, a former curator of Islamic art at the Brooklyn Museum. They had to shape their story without classic works from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and Iranian private collections.

Daftari, who organized "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking" when she was a MoMA curator, laments the chilling effect that the sanctions have on art exchange. More transparent Treasury Department regulations, she suggests, might make the possibility of applying for art loans more feasible.

"I find it highly disconcerting that sanctions should affect the representation of Iranian modern art," she

comments, stressing that the opinion is her own. “Sanctions are hurting badly the average people in Iran and now even the representation of a historical period in a museum show?”

One of the final works in “Iran Modern” is an ink drawing by Ardeshir Mohassess, the artist and satirist who was the subject of a 2008 retrospective at the Asia Society guest-curated by artists Shirin Neshat and Nicky Nodjoumi. Mohassess, who had been critical of the Shah’s regime, was living in New York in 1978, when he made this drawing commenting on Iran’s new reality. The Revolution had begun, and the era of Iran’s freewheeling avant-garde was over.



Ardeshir Mohassess, *Untitled*, 1978.

KATAYOUN BEGLARI-SCARLET AND PETER SCARLET COLLECTION.

The careers of its artists, however, were not. Several figures in the Asia Society show, who had returned from abroad to live and work in Iran, continue to exhibit around the world–including at the Metropolitan Museum of

Art, where Farmanfarmaian and Tanavoli were featured last year in a small contemporary-Iranian-art installation within the new Islamic-art galleries.

That was another sign that traditional boundaries are eroding. After “Iran Modern,” we might find that these Middle Eastern modernists—now so contemporary—will enjoy a sort of Renaissance in the West.

ARTICLE TAGS

- **Abby Weed Grey**
- **Ardeshir Mohassess**
- **Asia Society Museum**
- **Cisneros Foundation**
- **Faramarz Pilaram**
- **Fereshteh Daftari**
- **Grey Art Gallery**
- **Guggenheim Museum**
- **Houshang Pezeshknia**
- **Ibrahim El-Salahi**
- **Iran**
- **Layla Diba**
- **Marcos Grigorian**
- **Melissa Chiu**
- **Metropolitan Museum Of Art**
- **Modernism**
- **Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian**
- **Museum Of Modern Art**
- **Parviz Tanavoli**
- **Reina Sofía**
- **Robin Cembalest**
- **Rubin Museum**
- **Tate**
- **Tehran Biennial**

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Paula Hayes: Growing Power

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