

## Modernity and Revolution

*A recent show of Iranian art focused on the turbulent time from 1960 to 1980, juxtaposing formally inventive works of art with politically charged photographs and posters.*

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

**A**mong the challenges to American complacency posed by the events of Sept. 11 has been an awareness that concepts which we consider unequivocally good—among them modernity, democracy and individual liberty—are often considered far more problematic in other parts of the world. Do people in the Middle East really “hate freedom,” as our president opined, or does that “freedom” appear to many in the non-Western world as a code word for the forced imposition of the American way of life? How salutary is modernity if it is accompanied by the erasure of cultural traditions? Is free-market capitalism really the only way to participate in the global economy?

Nowhere are these questions more pertinent than in contemporary Iran. The inclusion of Iran in President Bush’s “axis of evil” formulation slights the complex negotiation between secular and religious power currently under way in that country, where the hereditary religious authorities are at odds with a president popularly elected on a platform of modest reform. Nor does it acknowledge Iran’s prolonged struggle to establish a place in the modern world that preserves its sense of history and identity.

These issues came inescapably to the fore in “Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture” at New York University’s Grey Art Gallery. Curated by gallery director Lynn Gumpert and Fereshteh Daftari, assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art, it covered the crucial period from 1960 to 1980 during which various forms of modernity were explored before being swept aside by the Iranian revolution and the imposition of an Islamic state. The exhibition was divided into three distinct sections: a selection of paintings, sculptures and works on paper from the Grey’s collection; a set of revolutionary posters; and a sampling of photographs taken just before and during the revolution by the Iranian-born photojournalist Abbas. The exhibition thus offered three views of this tumultuous period, each of which captured the events from a slightly different perspective.

In the excellent catalogue accompanying the show, Daftari describes Iran’s relationship to the West as a series of pendulum swings. By the 19th century, the Qajar dynasty, which had ruled Iran since 1785, had become increasingly enamored of all things Western. It patronized a style of court painting deeply indebted to Western ideas of space, perspective and verisimilitude. This situation continued through the ascension of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 and the rule of the first Pahlavi Shah, Reza Khan. In 1941 his son Mohammad Reza Khan assumed the

throne. Under his rule, which lasted until the 1979 revolution, Iran underwent a program of modernization that included land reform, women’s rights and the sale of state-owned enterprises to the private sector. With the rise of oil wealth, the gap between rich and poor widened, stoking the social discontent that would erupt in the revolution.

From the perspective of art, this was a time of great ferment. The old Western-based realist court style was challenged on both sides, by artists who had traveled to France in the late ’40s and ’50s and were inspired by the Cubist revival there, and also by proponents of a rediscovery of traditional and popular modes of art, among them Persian miniatures, popular, religion-based coffeehouse paintings, calligraphy and metalwork.

**T**he exhibition opened with a group of artists identified with the Saqqakhaneh School. Named for a ceremonial structure, this movement was characterized by the effort to inscribe traditional motifs and themes into art that would be modern in an

authentically Iranian way. The works in this section of the show were acquired during the ’60s and ’70s by American collector Abby Weed Grey, founder of the Grey Art Gallery. While not a complete picture of Iranian modern art in the prerevolutionary period, these selections suggested certain general tendencies while introducing some of the central figures of the time.

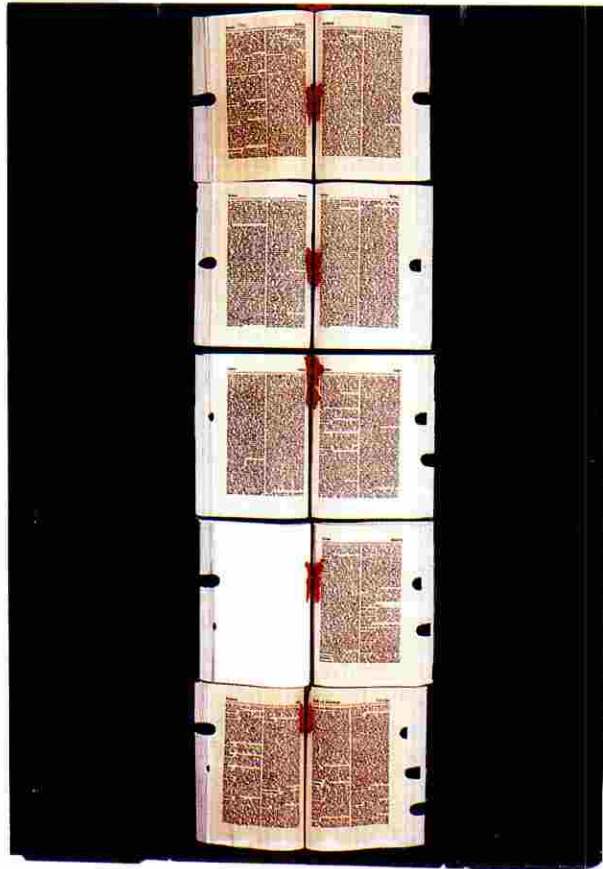
One of the most influential was Marcos Grigorian, an art dealer, teacher and curator as well as artist, who sought to literally ground his work in his native soil by using sand and dirt for materials. The exhibition included examples of both. The heavily textured dirt painting in particular seems related to contemporaneous work by European artists like Tàpies and Dubuffet. However, its cracked dry surface evokes Iran’s desert landscape in a manner that underscores Grigorian’s deeply nationalistic intentions.

Hossein Zenderoudi, an important student of Grigorian’s, created work that has a more obviously Iranian content. One of his most striking paintings is *The Hand* (ca. 1960), which resembles a page from an illuminated manuscript. A black border inscribed with whiplash lines of Persian script frames a gold ground whose geometric patterning is built up from smaller script. At the center of the work is the silhouette of a silver hand rising from a bowl. The hand, a recurring motif throughout the show, is an important Shiite symbol commemorating the severed hand of Harat Abbas. He tried to bring water back to the martyrs in the seventh-century battle of

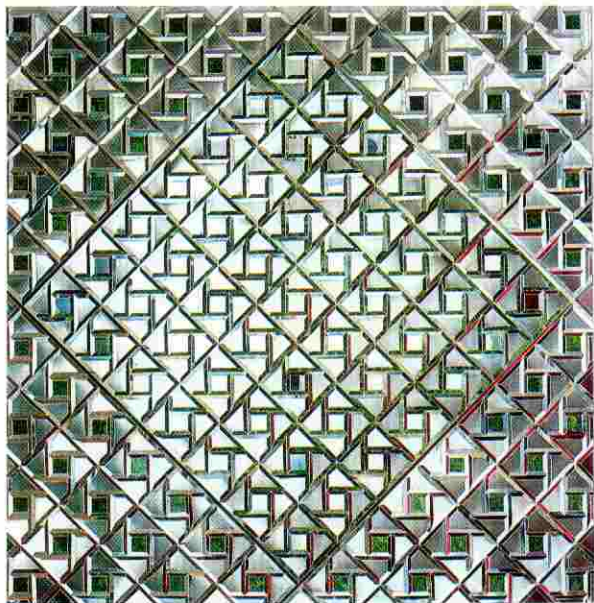
Karbala, the conflict that divided the Muslim religion into the Shiite and Sunni sects. The traditional overtones of the image meld seamlessly with a modernist concern with abstract form.

The hand also appears in the works of Faramarz Pilaram, whose metallic-accented paintings refer to both Iranian metalwork and architecture. In *Mosques of Isfahan* (ca. 1962), abstracted gold and silver hands rest atop geometric forms that resemble minarets. Islamic architecture is also invoked in the work of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian. One of the exhibition’s few women artists, she was represented here by *Eight Times Eight* (ca. 1975), a large square wall piece composed of small segments of mirror and steel set in a diagonal grid. Light glints off the mirrors, transforming the surface into a window and simultaneously a screen inspired by the intricate geometric ornamentation found in Persian mosques and palaces.

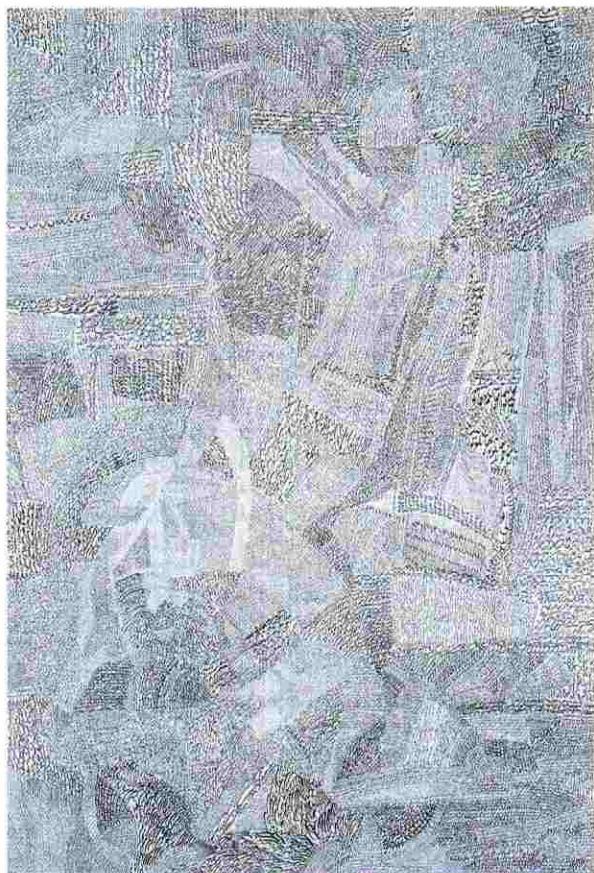
The exhibition also included the work of Parviz Tanavoli, an artist who chose to explore the medium of sculpture despite (or perhaps because of) the Islamic interdiction against idolatry. Travels in Italy



*Armajani: Warren Report, 1965, books, wood, ribbon, wax, 44% by 16 1/4 by 4 1/4 inches. All photos courtesy Grey Art Gallery, NYU, New York.*



Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian: *Eight Times Eight*, ca. 1975, mirror, stainless steel, paint, 51 inches square. Collection the artist, New York.



Armajani: *Calligraphy*, 1964, ink on canvas, 60 by 41 1/2 inches.

brought him into contact with modern sculptors such as Emilio Greco and Marino Marini, but upon returning home he realized that pursuing the figurative tradition in his country would not be viable. Instead he drew on pre-Islamic and Islamic structures and ritual objects to create totemic bronze sculptures. *Heech* (1972) is based on the Persian word for "nothing." Its sinuous arching form perches on a pedestal and is slightly rotated toward the top, giving it a serpentlike quality. Meanwhile, the paradoxical negation implied

by the title seems intended to draw attention to the peculiar relationship between form and meaning in calligraphic writing. By realizing the calligraphic mark in three dimensions, Tanavoli underscores its existence as a beautiful shape independent of its signification. *Heech Tablet* (1973), melding architectural form and geometric abstraction, extends this conceit using a bronze slab whose surface is incised with rows of small rectangles meant to evoke a cuneiform inscription. Three bronze padlocks attached to loops on its front emphasize the inaccessible secrets hidden within the encoded text.

For American audiences, the work of Siah Armajani was probably the biggest surprise of this show. In 1960 Armajani left his native Iran to attend college in Minnesota, where he continues to reside today. He is best known for constructions that draw on vernacular American architectural forms. The sculptures are often embellished with texts that celebrate the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy. By striking contrast, his early work is based on Persian calligraphy and participates in the esthetics and concerns of the Saqqakhaneh School. *Prayer for the Sun* (1962) is a brooding abstract painting in which a pair of dark blue and brown ovals hover within an almost black field. They are etched with tiny, illegible calligraphic marks. *Calligraphy* (1964) is a delicate ink drawing in which patches of similarly unreadable Persian script meander in different directions to form an organic abstract pattern. By 1965, the influence of Armajani's adopted country is more clearly felt in *Warren Report*. Words related to the report's content about the J.F.K. assassination and their definitions are traced from an English dictionary onto the pages of five vertically arranged open books.

In the context of this show, Armajani's ongoing concern with architectural form and his reliance on text as both message and ornament took on a new, Persian ambience. Indeed, as the title of the exhibition suggests, his early preoccupation with writing reflects a central aspect of Iranian culture. In contrast to the Western tendency to see text as a transparent means of communication, Persian calligraphy carries multiple associations that spill over into art, literature, religion and daily life. A character's interpretation depends as much on its abstract form, its beauty and its sacred significance as on its literal meaning. This contrast with Western assumptions, along with the problematic status of figuration from an Islamic point of view, may explain why calligraphy continued to play a central role in Iranian modernism.

The works here also suggested how frequently religious motifs, whether in the form of the references to mosques and Shiite symbols in the works of Zenderoudi and Pilaram, or in Tanavoli's recourse to ritual objects and sculptures of pre-Islamic Persia, became a way for midcentury Iranian artists to return to a more authentic Iranian identity. In the years leading up to the revolution, religious and secular consciousness could coexist, and it appears from the history laid out in the catalogue that these artists

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were perfectly at home in the Shah's Iran. In fact, the government was supportive of their efforts, finding a place for their work alongside that of Western artists in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, which opened its doors in October 1977 [see *A.i.A.*, Oct. '81]. But the political winds were shifting, and by 1979 it was no longer possible to separate nationalism from Islamicism in Iran.

The second section of the exhibition consisted of an assortment of revolutionary posters chronicling that change. But again, things were more complex than they might appear at first glance. As Middle East Studies professor Haggai Ram notes in an informative catalogue essay, it would be a mistake to view the posters, and the revolution in which they played a central part, as a purely Islamic matter. While these often anonymous posters use many symbols drawn from the Shiite version of Islam practiced in Iran, they also employ a visual language familiar from revolutionary struggles around the globe.

Sometimes these converge, as in the recurring motif of the hand that is at once the hand of Harat Abbas and the upraised fist of proletariat revolution. Some posters contain echoes of the rhetorical geometry of the Russian Constructivists, as in one anonymous poster depicting a red arrow smashing a series of black pedestals topped with symbols of the Shah and the United States. Others bring to mind Pop art. This is especially the case with a poster of the Ayatollah Khomeini in which the mullah's overexposed black-and-white face appears against a Warholian rainbow backdrop.

Particularly compelling are posters with images of women in the black chadors which have become synonymous in the Western mind with Islamic fundamentalism's oppression of women. The images here remind us that

Tanavoli: *Heech Tablet* (detail), 1973, bronze on travertine base, 71 1/2 by 18 1/2 by 11 1/2 inches.





*Abbas: (far left) Ayatollah Khomeini with Ammunition Belt, 1980, and (left) Young Woman at Anti-Shah Demonstration, Tehran, 1978, gelatin silver prints, 24 by 20 inches.*

*Below left, artist unknown, Poster with Red Arrow and Sun, ca. 1980-88, silkscreen, 14 by 19 inches. Collection Nicky Nodjoui.*

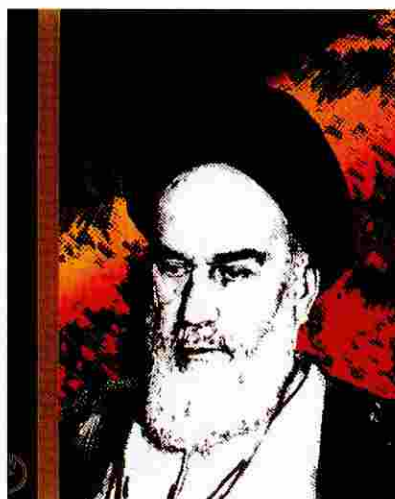
*Below, Abbas: Woman at Pro-Shah Demonstration, Tehran, 1979, gelatin silver print, 20 by 24 inches. All Abbas images Magnum Photos.*



*Right, artist unknown, Poster of Zeinab, 1979, 28 by 20 inches. Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University.*



*Far right, artist unknown, Poster of Ayatollah Khomeini (detail), ca. 1980-85, 12 by 11 inches. Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University.*



many Iranian women initially took up the veil as a symbol of solidarity with the revolution. One poster that emphasizes this presents a white silhouette of a veiled figure raising her fist in a gesture of defiance. Within her silhouette, the anonymous artist has depicted a sea of black-garbed women with upraised fists. Alongside is a line of veiled figures on camels stretching toward a distant architectural structure. The poster makes the connection between these modern Iranian revolutionaries and a legendary Islamic woman named Zeinab, who rallied the Shiite survivors of the battle of Karbala. Thus it underscores the vital supporting role played by women in the early days of the revolution as well as in certain periods of Islamic history.

The posters demonstrate that many other currents intermingled with Islamic zeal during the revolutionary period. Iranian nationalism mixed with visions of international solidarity of the oppressed, while anti-Americanism and anticolonialism coexisted with religious fervor. The posters also capture some sense of the enthusiasm and high ideals surrounding the revolutionary movement at its inception.

**B**ut if the posters offer a romanticized vision of the uprising, the photographs of Abbas tell another story. Abbas, who uses one name professionally, was born in Iran in 1944 and moved with his family to Algeria when he was eight. In the '70s he

returned to Iran to embark on a photographic investigation of the social and political changes under way in his native country. Fortunately, he was in Tehran when the revolution broke out in 1979 and was able to capture the turmoil firsthand. Some of his photographs were used by the revolutionaries for posters and other propaganda materials. However, after he published the series in book form in 1980, Abbas was barred from Iran and only recently, given Iran's more open society, has he been able to return and resume his photographic portrait project.

Abbas's photographs of 1970s Iran provide a remarkable eyewitness account of a society in the midst of wrenching change. Many of the pre-revolutionary photographs capture scenes of ordinary activities that would subsequently become extraordinary—women in a beauty parlor, for instance, or men and women sitting together in a café. He also managed to meet and photograph some of the country's top political figures.

Once the revolution began, he focused on crowds, rallies, expressions of euphoria and growing fanaticism. In one photograph, shouting men with machine guns join hands outside the U.S. embassy where the American hostages were being held. In another, taken from above, female supporters of the revolution become a huge mass of fabric-encircled faces and raised arms. Other photographs reveal a violent underside—men make a fire in the street and burn a photograph of the Shah; an old woman accused of being a supporter of the regime is pulled down the street by a crowd of angry men. One shocking image depicts a crowd carrying a charred mass identified in the caption as the remains of a suspected prostitute. In a similar vein is a set of three photographs of the Shah's prime minister, Abbas Hoveyda. In a 1971 photograph he sits surrounded by standing advisers. Another image from the same year shows him relaxing with his family in the yard of his country house. The third image, from 1979, shows his body in a morgue surrounded by smiling revolutionaries brandishing guns.

Taken together, the three parts of "Between Word and Image" suggested how misleading it is to label societies as modern or traditional, secular or religious, reformist or reactionary. In Iran, as this exhibition demonstrated, apparently opposing ideas mingle in striking ways. Meanwhile, modern Iran continues to elude categorization. As I write, students are flooding the streets in Tehran to protest a death sentence handed down by a provincial judge against a professor who declared that Muslims should not blindly follow their leaders. The reformist president declared the sentence improper, and the mullahs, after initially upholding it, have been forced by the outcry to reconsider. The tensions so visible in this exhibition clearly have not been resolved. □

*"Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture" was co-organized by New York University's Grey Art Gallery and the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies in association with the Iran Heritage Fund, and was on view at the Grey Art Gallery, New York [Sept. 18-Dec. 7, 2002]. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue, published by I.B. Tauris, with essays by Shiva Balaghi, Peter Chelkowski, Haggai Ram and the show's curators, Lynn Gumpert and Fereshteh Daftari.*

*Author: Eleanor Heartney is the author of Postmodernism, published by the Tate Gallery and Cambridge University Press (2000).*