

## ART REVIEW; Modernism Gets a Revolutionary Makeover in Iran

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Until just a few years ago, "modern art" and "contemporary art" meant "Western art," at least in this part of the world. Then came multiculturalism, globe-trotting biennials, the Internet and other such mind-dilating phenomena, and the perspective changed. Modern and contemporary, Western and non-Western are now recognized as overlapping categories.

Cultures endlessly borrow from one another, though the cosmopolitan chemistry of those exchanges can easily go unacknowledged. When an artist from one culture adopts a medium peculiarly associated with a different culture -- oil painting, say, or calligraphy -- he runs the risk of having his work dismissed as derivative, inauthentic. Yet viewers familiar with the culture that artist is coming from may well find something inventive taking place.

They may see an artist approaching an adopted medium or style purely as raw material, something to be reshaped, edited and invested with ideas that have little or nothing to do with the original material itself. What's produced is a new, or maybe new-old, thing. Think of Matisse and Islamic art, of Picasso and African art, or of the many young artists from Asia and Africa working in video and conceptual art today.

"Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture," a spartan-looking exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery, is about such creative borrowing, about customized versions of modernism and revamped models of the contemporary. It's also about other things -- the inseparability of art and politics, the interplay of modernism and Islam -- and having so many thematic strands going at once raises potential problems. Depending on the amount of synthetic thinking you're prepared to bring to the show, it can seem either richly layered or disjointed and underthought.

Either way, the components are fascinating. The paintings, sculptures, documentary photographs and political posters that have been gathered together span roughly three decades, from 1960 through the 1980's. The pivotal date is 1979, the year of the Iranian Revolution, which the earlier work anticipates in subtle ways and from which the later work flows.

When the period began, Iran was in thrall to American political interests and the Pahlavi dynasty was in power. The shah of Iran actively promoted westernization, and ambitious young artists sought ways to enter the international mainstream. For some, the solution was to move to Europe and master European styles, in a practice of emulation-as-homage that has a long Asian history. Others made art that was modern-looking by Western standards but Iranian in context, and such work makes up the first section of the show.

The artists were a talented group, and outstanding among them was Hossein Zenderoudi, who around 1960 began to create collage and watercolor paintings incorporating Iranian vernacular imagery -- including folk emblems, charms, numerological formulas, zodiac signs -- along with personally coded designs.

His painting titled "The Hand" is based on a popular form representing the severed hand of the early Muslim martyr Hazrat Abbas, who died in A.D. 680 at the battle of Karbala, an incident that served as a rallying cry for the revived militant Islam of the 1979 Revolution. Here, though, the artist has softened the image by covering it with decorative patterning and all-over fields of calligraphy.

Written language, that most exalted of Islamic art forms, was also a primary medium for Mr. Zenderoudi's contemporaries. The sculptor Parviz Tanavoli turned the Persian characters spelling "nothing" into a three-dimensional sculpture. Siah Armajani, who now lives in the United States, scratched calligraphic phrases into abstract paintings and produced them on computers. Where traditional scribes treated the written word with reverence, he approached it with a playful, prodding skepticism.

His pieces, along with most of the other paintings and sculptures in the exhibition, are owned by the Grey Art Gallery, a gift from its founder, Abby Weed Grey. In the 1960's, this Minnesota native was collecting Middle Eastern contemporary work all but unknown to the Western market. In doing so, she was way ahead of the multicultural curve and ended up preserving art that might have vanished in the politically turbulent Iran of the 1970's and 80's.

That period is the subject of the rest of the show, and the transition to it is made through a selection of pictures by the photojournalist who goes by the single name Abbas. Iranian-born but Paris-based (until recently he was president of Magnum Photos), he began returning to Iran in 1971 to document the country's modernization.

Early pictures include shots of young men relaxing in mosques, of women in Western clothes in beauty shops, and of the shah and his urbane prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda. A routine visit by the photographer in 1979, however, coincided with the Revolution, and the pictures he took show a society jolted into an alternative political universe. The shah has been replaced by Ayatollah Khomeini; Hoveyda, executed as a political criminal, lies dead in a city morgue; women are dressed in head-to-foot black veils; young men are storming the American embassy.

In such images, it's as if the contradictory impulses found in Iranian modernist art are being acted out, radicalized and violently intensified, in everyday life. Where artists in the 60's balanced Western aesthetic modes with a reconsidered Iranian and Islamic content, late-1970's Iranian political culture paradoxically rejected and sustained Western influence in a revolution that was Islamicist and Marxist.

This complicated dynamic is embodied in another art form, the political poster. The dozens of examples that fill the Grey's downstairs gallery and make up the third and last section of the show were made by trained and untrained artists in university-based workshops. And their visual vocabulary is an Iranian-Western blend.

Mass-produced portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and other religious leaders, for example, are done in the Pop colors and silkscreen style of Andy Warhol, who had once painted a portrait of the shah. In other posters, the image of a defiantly raised fist has immediate precedents in American and European countercultural graphics. But in one Iranian version the fists hold red tulips, a Sufi symbol for self-sacrifice.

Unmistakably Iranian and Islamic in all this work is the presence of Arabic and Persian texts: Koranic quotations, lines of poetry, exhortatory slogans, the names of political martyrs present and past. The ubiquitous phrase "There is no God but God," which also appears in mosques, in books and on tombs, takes on the visual weight of an icon. Its presence on posters gives a humble, ephemeral art form an important role in an all-encompassing ideological and linguistic network, and gives popular art -- in this case, basically advertising -- a moral authority it seldom has in the West.

The exhibition, organized by Fereshteh Daftari, an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and Lynn Gumpert, director of the Grey Gallery, doesn't bluntly spell any of this out.

And there is probably no way it could without sacrificing visual allure, which, however spare, is considerable.

But it does offer many suggestive ideas: about the two-way direction of aesthetic influence; about the political choices art is constantly making; about the fluidity of concepts like modern and contemporary; and about how modern, even postmodern, the most self-consciously traditionalist forms of Islamic culture can be. All these ideas are further explored in a concise book titled "Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution," which is both more and less than an exhibition catalog, and which I recommend.

"Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture" remains at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, Greenwich Village, (212) 998-6780, through Dec. 7.