

1940s Modernism of Iran: Analytical Study and Introduction to Iranian Female Artists

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Abstract

After his enthronement in 1941, Mohammad Reza Shah, the second Pahlavi king, began advocating and endorsing Western modernist ideologies and principles in Iran, and his aim was to expose the social and cultural hemisphere of the Iranian society to a set of new currents that would later result in the country's advancement and progression. The strengthened Iranian-Western relations of the time created a diverse range of opportunities and possibilities for modern art to take the initiative introductory steps in the Iranian art venue. However, in comparison to the previous eras, the female presence was acknowledged. The author aims to study the reaction and approach of Iranian artists, especially Iranian female artists, to this new exposure. In this regard, certain questions are set to be answered through this research: 1- How was modernism introduced to the Iranian art venue?, 2- How did Iranian artists, specifically female artists, approach modernism?, and 3- How did Mohammad Reza Shah's modernization attempts give exposure to female artists? To answer the former questions, the author aims to use the qualitative descriptive-analytical research method through the study of historical and theoretical literary works in English and Persian and recorded visual documents of the said period collected from libraries in Tehran and other open resources.

Keywords: Contemporary Art; Modernity; Neo-traditionalism; Pahlavi-era; Women

1. Introduction

The 14th century marked some of the most significant years in European history. The previous era, known as the Middle Ages, despite the vague historical documentation of its beginning and end, assumably lasted from AD 500 to 1500 (Roesser, 2019), and through the governed sovereignty and social practices and conducts, the actions of individuals were arbitrated under religious scrutinization. During this era, religion and “the certain belief that divine beings could provide protection, the powerful experience of community (a major benefit of communal existence), and the sense of mutual support and obligation toward other people. These are things that gave meaning to medieval life and helped cushion people against the burden of uncertainty and the precariousness of day-to-day existence (Scott, 2010).” Some scholars argue that the medieval era provided little room for personal growth and intellectual improvement for people, as the path of betterment and righteousness was constructed and navigated by the religious sect of the community. In regards to the limitations set during this age in terms of individual understanding of oneself, Jacob Burckhardt, Swiss historian, states: “In the Middle Ages both side of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was turned without – lay dreaming half-awake beneath the illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues (Burckhardt, 1878).” Burckhardt believes the religious disposition of the medieval era perpetuated the flawed understanding of human nature since “...man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category (Burckhardt, 1878).” The lack of acknowledgment of one’s capabilities of developing perception and individual philosophy on livelihood, became one of the main adamant reasons for the uprising of a group of scholars and intellectuals against religious restrictions.

Due to the increasing catastrophe of the Holy Roman Empire, increased power of the Roman Catholic Church, and the unstable framework to create a unified organization for spiritual and substantial life, the seed of a pivotal cultural and scientific enlightenment was planted in the Italian society in the late 1400s, that gave birth to some of history’s most renowned scientists, philosophers, and artists. The Renaissance, deriving from the French word, , meaning rebirth, was known as the era of enlightenment, and the mentioned intellectual movement “...separated the Middle Ages from the Modern Age and was accompanied by Humanism and Reformation. This development was a return to the classical arts of Greek and Roman Antiquity (Charles, 2012).”

The intensive study of ancient art and collective research in the scientific field resulted in acknowledgeable achievements on various grounds such as technological advancements, intellectual and philosophical studies, and artistry. Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, introduced the world to a number of noteworthy artists such as Michelangelo and Donatello (Charles, 2012), who dominated the fine arts with their precise depictions of men and nature. However, artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael displayed their long-lasting influence on European art (Charles, 2012), with over two hundred years of dominance in the art hemisphere.

One of the most significant introductions that revolutionized the art and architectural world was “the remarkable geometric adaptation, first demonstrated in Florence, Italy, by Filippo Brunelleschi around 1425 (Edgerton, 2009)”, known as the linear perspectivism. Linear perspectivism made it possible for artists and designers to create a three-dimensional setting in a two-dimensional art piece. Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, created between 1495-1498, and Andrea Mantegna’s *The Crucifixion*, painted around 1457 and 1459, are some of the most recognized fine arts to have used this technique to portray a more realistic setting (Seddik, 2019). Despite the notable artistic improvements and accomplishments witnessed during the era of enlightenment, the ideological academic principles and conservative art practices in the art field later began causing dismay and perceptual conflicts amongst the artists, and some artisans believed due to the inflexible teachings and expectations from an artist, their creative capabilities and understanding of art were both restricted and deteriorated.

Amidst the strict academic art principles and practices, an artist by the name of Édouard Manet flummoxed the public with one of his renowned paintings created in the early 1860s, *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe* (Lunch on Grass). In comparison to the paintings created by artists such as Carl Spitzweg and William Holman Hunt, the painting was perceived compositionally incorrect, incomplete, and academically unacceptable. Proceeding to today, some art historians and scholars believe “Manet always composed badly when he juxtaposed personages (Fried, 1996)” and his art was “a model of a bad painting (Fried, 1996)”, and lacked depth and perception in projecting reality. However, the very heavily criticized artist and his controversial painting highly contributed to a new wave that would later revolutionize the art world, hence resulting in labeling him the foreground and father of Modernism (Fried, 1996). Under the current art movement, Impressionism was the earliest significant modern art style that emerged, and the following artists depicted their observations through new artistic understandings that not only confronted the rules of academic painting but gave more artistic freedom to the creators. Akin to Renaissance art, where an artist’s individualist perception was evident in their art works (Nichols, 2012), Modern art favored individualism and gave more room for artistic discovery and experimentation to the practitioner (Aubrey, 1935).

One of the earliest styles to be introduced to the art community through modernism was Impressionism. Exceedingly different from the teachings of academic painting, Impressionist artists favored painting in open spaces and out in nature to capture the delicate reflection of colors and light simultaneously with the natural changes occurring in their environment (Tate, 2022). Through the instantaneous events occurring in the nature, the artist became more venturesome with discrete color palettes and textures to work with, as the varied strength of light during different times of the day created more options for the artists to experiment with. These artists explored the versatility of the brush’s freer movement and aimed at achieving complementary and new visual impressions in contrast to the previous art techniques that prevented them from practicing further individual artistic innovation (Tate, 2022). Impressionism was among the many distinct art styles introduced to the art realm under modernism, as with the progression of time and habitual changes, more aesthetics, techniques, and styles found a stable spot in the domain, hence giving birth to later movements, such as Postmodernism.

Modernism became a stabilized movement in Europe and the diversity it offered to the art community encouraged and welcomed more artists to engage with it; however, most countries remained immune to these changes for a long period and showed less fascination and appeal to the current artistic movement. Contrary to their Western counterparts, artists from different regions of the world either practiced their country's traditional art, or were yet infatuated with the previously introduced art styles, mainly academic painting styles of the Renaissance era.

Art in Iran was perceived as a tool to endorse religious spiritualism, and of visual pleasure for the royal sect and nobles of the community. Until the late Qajar era (late 1840s), the majority of artists residing in Iran practiced different forms of traditional art, but one that stood out the most to the kings and was highly budgeted and sponsored by the royalties was miniature painting (Pakbaz, 2000). However, upon the formal introduction to academic painting through the abroad educational opportunities provided for the Iranian artists, traditional art was gradually regarded as a regressed art form and gave its place to the foreign art style.



Antoin Sevruguin, *Kamal-ol-Molk*, 1840-1933, photograph
http://www.asia.si.edu/archives/finding_aids/sevruguin.html

Mohammad Ghaffari, better known as Naghash Bashi, a pseudonym given to him by the fifth Qajar king, Naser-ol-Din-Shah, or Kamal-ol-Molk, became the forefather and main promoter of academic painting in Iran, and established a school under his name to further expand academic art principles in the country. Due to such efforts, Iranian artists' fascination with and loyalty to European classicist and naturalistic art styles exceeded the modern art era and prevented them to acknowledge the new European artistic currents upon their emergence. Due to this incident, the echo of the modern art and its introductions reached the Iranian art hemisphere 70 years after its earlier emergence. As a result of this significant delay, an accurate understanding of modernism became absent within the Iranian art world and according to some art historians, this lack of true comprehension of the origins of modern art and the

ideological concept behind it was evident in the works of Iranian artists (Pakbaz, 2000).

Despite the apparent imitation of European art and lack of in-depth education on modernism that was witnessed during this period, the 20th century ruling government of Iran acknowledged modern art as a tool to advocate nationalism and introduce the country's values and talents to the Western hemisphere of the globe, including the female population of the Iranian art community (Ashtiani, 1963).

2. Emergence of Modernism and Introduction to Iranian Female Artists

Akin to the majority of art communities in different regions of the world, Iran has had a diverse range of versatile experiences in terms of artistic innovations and understandings throughout its history. However, one can say the 1940s marked some of the most innovative and groundbreaking years for the Iranian art community, due to the conflicting nature and philosophy of modern art with the traditional society of Iran.

After the decline of the Qajar Dynasty, Reza Shah (1925-1941) was crowned as the first king of the Pahlavi era and through expanded diplomatic relations and political affairs, the mentioned king began reconstructing the social setting and livelihood of his people from traditional to modern (Keddie, Ghaffary, 1999). A key change witnessed in the society during Reza Shah's kingship was the inclusion and involvement of women in social and political hemispheres. After centuries of being neglected from practicing their basic rights, including education, the first Pahlavi king encouraged women to become literate and created basic opportunities for them to be seen in public settings and participate in different activities.

During this era, many women advocated for women's rights and began writing about the cruciality of the matter in journals and newspapers. To induce the opportunity to educate the Iranian society on the importance of the inclusion of Iranian female population in social activities, some of these advocates established female-oriented newspaper and magazine agencies to shed light on the matter (Afary, 1998). Although, despite his continuous efforts, and at times, inconsiderate practices, Reza Shah was merely capable of transforming a traditional country like Iran to a modern society, due to the lack of appropriate educational opportunities and correct and strategic promotion on modernity and its possible beneficial fruits for the country (Motamedi, 2016).

Following Reza Shah's dethronement from his monarchic position, his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979), was chosen as the next Pahlavi king and soon held his coronation ceremony to continue his father's path. During his reign, the successor king continued advocating modernist principles and provided the basic educational needs for the Iranian society to adapt to modernity. In order to create a better understanding for Iranian people about this foreign phenomenon, men and women needed to become literate and educated to be able to comprehend and practice the necessities of a modern society. Akin to his father, Mohammad Reza Shah established numerous schools across the country, and in comparison to the previous eras, women became more involved in social settings and a considerable number of them got employed in different fields (Colliver Rice, 2004).

One of the main fields that witnessed a gradual growth in its female population was the art community of Iran. The main influence to bring more female participants in different fields is known to be Farah Diba, Mohammad Reza Shah's wife. The Pahlavi queen's affiliations and efforts, modern art was officially introduced to the Iranian people in the late 1940s. During this era, many Iranian artists began learning about modernism and the current art practices and created art using a diverse range of techniques and styles that were introduced through this movement. The official establishment of the modern art movement in Iran began with the establishment of the Academy of Fine Arts in Tehran in 1940 (Keshmirshakan, 2017), and under André Godard's systematic foundation and principle, modern art began to be officially introduced and taught to the Iranian students (Diba, 2013).

Following Kamal-ol-Molk's post-mortem and the establishment of the Academy of Fine Arts, modernism induced the decline of Kamal-ol-Molk's academic painting principles. Due to its inability to coexist with academic painting as a consequence of its strict and inflexible techniques and practices, modernism aimed to bring more artistic freedom to the artists. Simultaneously with its introduction in academic institutions, many Iranian students and artists from abroad returned to their country and a greater number of them began teaching modern art at the Academy of Fine Arts. With their return and through their teachings,

modern art became more stabilized and prominent in the Iranian art community and the society began acknowledging its presence (Ekhvas, 2008).

According to common belief, the inclusion of women in the social arena gave an impression of a modern society, as their role was not solely domestic-based, but independent and educated. Hence the reason, in comparison to the previous eras, during the rule of the second Pahlavi king, Iranian art community witnessed an expandable growth in the number of female artists due to Mohammad Reza Shah's policies on both modernizing the country and establishing an art style distinctively Iranian, known as the "National Art" (Pakbaz, 2000). The



Academy of Fine Arts (Faculty of Fine Arts)
University of Tehran, Farhad Niroumand
www.caoi.ir

two main traits of 'independent and educated' became part of the female artists' identity, as the majority of them were known to have lived abroad and received their academic degrees from European and American universities. With their participation in establishing a national art style, more diversity in terms of innovation and creativity was observed in the artworks of the contemporary/modern artists and by providing more cultural and artistic space to women, the possibility to showcase more artworks within this specific theme escalated. To provide women with better education and artistic opportunities, the courses offered by the Academy of Fine Arts prohibited any form of discrimination between men and women and all students were able to equally and mutually profit from the same visual arts teaching materials and courses (Pakbaz, 2000).

Thus, from the late 1940s, through the coherent efforts and exertions of modern art professors and students, the attention of the country's cultural agents shifted towards modern artists, and a noticeable number those receiving the attention were the female artists. Shokouh Riyazi (Expressionist and Abstract painter), Leili Taghipour (first Iranian children's book female illustrator), and Fakhri Angha (first female student to attend the Academy of Fine Arts – miniature and illuminated painter), each from three distinct art fields, were among the first female graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts (Alimadadi, 2017). Mohammad Reza Shah's policy to create an equilibrium for women and men created a diverse range of artistic opportunities for female artists to display their artistry to the public and akin to their male counterparts, female artists graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts or returning from Europe and the United States, had the prospect to begin their domestic artistic activities using two distinct thematic art styles: modern and neo-traditional art (Keshmirshakan, 2017).

It is essential to state that due to its dynamic and open background and themes, and its aim to focus on the artist's individualism, modern art was condemned as foreign for the Iranian artist. Nudity, being a common subject matter practiced in Western modern art, was perceived negatively and the still traditional society of Iran did not approach such "openness"

well (Shahmoradi, 2022). Art institutions in Iran seldom offered life drawing classes to the students, and in case of such practices, the models were fully clothed. Hence the reason the art students studying abroad would often experience immense cultural shock upon witnessing public nudity as a form of art practice. Regarding the matter of nudity in art, Mitra Shahmoradi, an Iranian artist and professor in Vienna, states that Iranian female artists, due to the artistic freedom they experienced abroad, used these classes as an advantage to gain the ability to express womanhood through their art (Shahmoradi, 2022). Artists such as Mitra Shahmoradi, Iran Darroudi, and Pari Yoush Ganji would remain in these classes or attend night drawing classes to learn how to create better anatomical compositions with the help of these models, who were mainly women (Mozaffari Saveji, 2018).

The mentioned artists who returned to their country were the main advocates of Western modern art. However, contrary to the first group, some female artists did not feel accustomed to the Western modern art practices due to contrasting cultural backgrounds and practical differences. A number of these female artists believed that art had to be created for the people of one's country, and considering the cultural gap between Iran and Western countries, modern art had to be reinterpreted to fit the Iranian standards. These women recognized the need to improve artistically, however, they aimed to use modern art techniques to further expand and elevate traditional Iranian art (Shahmoradi, 2022). Iran Darroudi, Farah Ossouli, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Pari Yoush Ganji, Mansooreh Hosseini, Farideh Lashai, and more among the many female artists who were inspired by the Iranian culture, traditions, and scenery, and by incorporating traditional Iranian elements and motifs in their art through individualistic and unique lens, they elevated their country's art and created prospects for Iranian art to gain positive international attention (Grigor, 2014).



The Bride of Memories, Iran Darroudi
1993. Oil on Canvas. 97x73

Some of the neo-traditionalist artists used Iranian literary and poetic references, such as Ahmad Shamlou, Forough Farrokhzad, and Jalal-el-Din Moḥammad Balkhi, also known as Rumi, as their artistic language to communicate with their audiences, however, most were inspired by the Iranian local arts and handicrafts, such as Iranian rugs and Kilims, architectures, and architectural elements, namely the mosaic tiles and windows (Keshmirshekan, 2017). Other artists like Iran Darroudi, used the spiritual elements commonly regarded in the Iranian culture, such as light and history, as their main artistic inspiration and element. Neo-traditional art, considering its close-to-home nature and diverse range of artistic techniques and

practices, provided female artists with many opportunities to openly express themselves, showcase their individual philosophy and perception on art and other lively matters, and without much struggle, communicate with their audiences; a unique experience previously neglected from them.

3. Tehran Biennial Exhibitions: Official Exposure to Iranian Female Artists

The launch of the first *Tehran Biennial Exhibition* is considered the most focal official action by the government in endorsing modern art. The biennial was held in 1958 in the three fields of painting, design, and sculpture. In midst of many conflicts over old and new and what was happening in Iranian art scene, the *Tehran Biennial* gave exposure to the works of modern artists to the Iranian audience, male and female alike (Pakbaz, 2000). The renowned Iranian female artists who had their artworks displayed in the first biennial were: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Mansooreh Hosseini, Neli Elayan, Shahrzad Mohtasham, Goli Iranpour, Farideh Sabi, Tamara Shirvani, and Tal'at Akhoondzadeh (Alimadadi, 2017). With their distinct styles, these female artists managed to not only get the attention of the Iranian viewers, but foreign art curators.

Each biennial witnessed a notable escalation in the number of its female participants, and during the fifth (final) *Tehran Biennial Exhibition*, the works of six female artists were chosen and were put on display for the public audience. The names of the accepted artists are as follows: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Mansooreh Hosseini, Sima Kooban, Leily Matin Daftari, Masoomeh Seyhoun, and Mary Shayans. From the first to the final Tehran Biennials, it became evident that through providing appropriate education and space for the female artists, and creating an equilibrium for all, women were not only not lacking, but were capable of displaying their unique artistic visions to represent their country (Shariati, 2011). Renowned artists, such as Mansooreh Hosseini and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, were also asked to participate in the Venice Biennale, and through their attendance in this international art venue did they acquire awards and medals that proved their excellence in arts.

In December 1974, an exhibition covering the three fields of painting, sculpture, and architecture was put on display through the support and funding of the Pahlavi government and supervision of Farah Diba, under the title of *First International Art Exhibition of Tehran*. Akin to the events witnessed in the previous exhibitions, the current arranged exhibition welcomed more female artists and “Among the participating women, Sheila Akhavan Saleh from Tehran Gallery, Farangis Ari and Helen Ragheb from Sullivan Gallery, Leily Matin Daftari, Mansooreh Hosseini, and Susan Varjavand from Zarvan Gallery, Masoomeh Seyhoun, Parvaneh Etemadi, Soodabeh Sharaf Shahi, Behjat Sadr, Shahla Arbabi, and Violet Motahed from Seyhoun and Qandriz Galleries, Homa Banai from Mes Gallery, Sima Bina from Naghsh Hall, and Tamila Shahinfar, Talieh Kamran, Soodabeh Ganjayi, Irandokht Mohasses and Iran Darroudi also participated individually in the painting category of this exhibition (Alimadadi, 2017)(Scheiwiller, 2014).” Through these historical documentations, it becomes apparent that modernity, despite its incoherent understanding by the Iranian rulers, managed to remove some of the previously fixated boundaries for women and provide them with more room for growth and improvement in their respective fields.

4. Conclusion

The Pahlavi era, through the introduction of modernity, despite its imitative approach from Western countries, managed to create an escape route for the traditional mindset on women

and validate the widespread presence of Iranian women in all of its cultural, social, and political aspects from the beginning. The process of modernity in Iranian society, with all of its ups and downs, delays, and negative consequences, was a field in which Iranian women could slowly move towards achieving their individual identity, which had been obscured and damaged by the dust of traditional and extremist beliefs for centuries. One of the most important areas in which women could reflect their human legitimacy and libertarian voice to society was art and literature. The fields of literature and art, due to their potentate capacities, as well as their closeness to the feminine nature, were suitable platforms for Iranian women to unveil their truth and become prominent figures within their society. Modern art created a diverse range of opportunities for female artists to display their artistic skills and individual mindset on social and political matters, and through their successful participation in both western modernism and neo-traditional art, they depicted a unique representation of their country.

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