Pleated Modernity: On Anthropologization of Modern Art in Iran, 1941–1979

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2024

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Bring new words!—for in newness is another sweetness told.

—Jalil Ziapour and his colleagues' motto, derived from a poem by the eleventh century poet Farrukhi Sistani

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

—Karl Marx

High Art is for all people, but Low Art is only liked by laymen.

—Ziapour

All history is the preparation for 'man' to become the object of sensuous consciousness, and for the needs of 'man as man' to become [natural, sensuous] needs. History itself is a real part of natural history—of nature's coming to be man

—Marx

1. Introduction: The Rooster Crows

1.1. General Introduction

When readers' gaze fell on the first issue of *Khorus Jangi* (The Fighting Rooster) in 1949, they would be immediately arrested by the cover image (fig.1.1) designed by Iranian modernist artist Jalil Ziapour (1920–1999). A lone, majestic rooster stood within a frame, devoid of any accompanying title or context, leaving the viewer in eager anticipation of what lies ahead. The rooster's self-confident posture would

strike the most—beak agape, chest thrust forward, one foot planted firmly behind, wings outstretched, while its angular lines and geometric composition convey that it belongs to an era of machines. Its posture, anchored by a sturdy triangular base, and its piercing gaze, locked on an invisible point beyond the frame, radiate a sense of unyielding alertness and resolve rather than impulsively charging forward. The rooster appears to be addressing an invisible audience beyond the frame as if heralding a pivotal moment in history. This visual rhetoric evokes the modernist imperative for collective action, urging the masses to seize agency in shaping their own destiny and, by extension, to inscribe themselves into the broader historical schema.

Upon turning the page, readers would encounter "From the City of Morning" (*Az shahr-e Sobh*) by modernist poet Nima Yushij (commonly known under his pen name Nima), confirming the initial impression conveyed by the cover image.[1] In its strategic positioning following the image, Nima's verse functions as a literary corollary to the pictorial proclamation, amplifying the periodical's avant-garde imperative to precipitate societal metamorphosis through aesthetic awakening. The poem emerges as a declaration of cultural renaissance, while its deliberate juxtaposition with Ziapour's gallinaceous figure intimates a calculated coalition between poets and visual artists in their concurrent pursuit of modernist ideals.[2] Ziapour explains:

> In our ancient literature, the rooster, as a messenger of the angel Bahman, would crow at dawn from atop the fences, awakening people and calling

[1]Please refer to the appendix for the English transcript of the poem.

[2]This alliance is unsurprising given the poet's long-standing role as the vanguard of cultural awakening and poetry's far stronger tradition of modernism compared to the fine arts. As Shiva Balaghi observes, "increasingly the role of artist was fused with that of the poet, the long-standing conscience of Iranian society" Balaghi, "Iranian Visual Arts in 'the Century of Machinery, Speed, and the Atom'," 31.

them to work and endeavor. For this reason, since it crowed and sounded the wake-up call, we chose the rooster as our symbol, both for what we were doing and for its beauty.[3]

Upon learning of this symbolically resonant choice, Nima responded by contributing both the aforementioned poem and a series of pedagogical essays entitled "Words from the Neighbor (harfhay-e hamsayeh)," demonstrating his sustained commitment to their modernist enterprise.[4]

In his composition, Ziapour synthesized ancient Persian iconography, specifically the mythological creatures adorning Persepolis' processional friezes, with contemporary modernist sensibilities.[5] This fusion extended to incorporate Picasso's rooster imagery, which emerged as a potent symbol of French resurgence during the Nazi occupation.[6] While Picasso's renditions featured fluid, playful contours, Ziapour's interpretation embraced geometric precision, embodying technological advancement through angular forms and linear elements.

This mechanical interpretation of the rooster as a herald of modernization finds its literary parallel in Nima's poetry, but the symbol takes on political dimensions. Nima's "From the City of Morning" narrates an awakening led by a rooster, echo-

[3]Ziapour, *An Anthology of Jalil Ziapour's Artistic and Investigative Speeches (Majmu'e-ye Sokhanrani-haye Honar-e-Tahghighi-e Zendeyad Ostad Jalil Ziapour)*, 287.

[4]Ziapour, 287. In traditional Iranian literature, the rooster (*khorus*) was considered a symbol of wakefulness and was associated with Bahman, the divine being. At dawn, the rooster was believed to announce Bahman's arrival. In Zoroastrian texts written in Pahlavi and in broader Zoroastrian tradition, the rooster was associated with the spiritual being ('*yazata*') known as *Sraosha* in the Avesta. In Islamic belief, the rooster became a symbol of awakening for the morning prayer. Foroutan, "Why the Fighting Cock ? The Significance of the Imagery of the Khorus Jangi and Its Manifesto ' The Slaughterer of the Nightingale '," xxxiii.

[5]According to Foroutan, Ziapour's Khorus was inspired by the friezes at Persepolis. Foroutan, "Why the Fighting Cock ? The Significance of the Imagery of the Khorus Jangi and Its Manifesto ' The Slaughterer of the Nightingale '," xxxiii.

[6]Foroutan, xxxvii.

ing Immanuel Kant's formulation of enlightenment as a gradual process of liberation from 'the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another." Kant recognized—and Nima seems to agree—the constraints on and necessity of freedom for enlightenment, as "a public can only slowly arrive at enlightenment."[7] In Nima's poem, the rooster's "Cock-a-doodle-doo" serves as a rallying cry for the enlightened few—the caravan—to navigate through the darkness towards a new dawn. But the process cannot be rushed Kant distinguishes between an "enlightened age" and an "age of enlightenment," asserting that while his era had not achieved full enlightenment, it was actively progressing towards it.[8] "From the City of Morning" echoes this view through its portrayal of a liminal temporality—a transitional period where night recedes, but dawn has not yet fully broken.

In Nima's poem, the caravan's journey symbolizes the gradual enlightenment process. As it advances, it allows the public to join, mirroring the way enlightenment spreads through society. The enlightened individuals—artists and literati among them—embody Kant's notion of those who have freed themselves from intellectual immaturity. "Who is it who has fallen behind? / Who is it, who is tired?" Nima challenges readers to join the caravan towards a new collective reality. By exercising their public reason, they contribute to society's gradual enlightenment, embodying the Kantian imperative to dare to know ("Sapere aude!").

The cover of *Khorus Jangi* proclaimed its cultural mission: "Increasing the culture of Iranians with the Fighting Rooster association."[9] The statement encapsulates the

[7]Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, 8:36.
[8]Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History.*
[9]Cited in Nahidi, *The Cultural Politics of Art in Iran*, 238. See the cover of Fighting Rooster Magazine, no. 1 (Tehran, 1948).

avant-garde's commitment to cultural enlightenment in mid-twentieth-century Iran while positioning these artists within a broader historical narrative of emancipation that traces back to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. Following in the footsteps of Nima, avant-garde artists like Jalil Ziapour saw themselves as the inheritors of this revolutionary spirit, envisioning their role as contributors to the public use of reason by liberating art from traditional constraints. Thus, he—like many of his like-minded artists—viewed his work as a continuation of the progressive ideals that had animated Iranian intellectuals since the Constitutional era, adapting the struggle for political and social reform to the realm of culture and aesthetics.

1.2 Historical Context

On August 15, 1941, the Allied forces swept into Iran. A month later, on September 15, they abdicated Reza Shah (1878-1944, reigned from 1925 to 1941), terminating his two decades of autocratic rule, and installed his twenty-one-year-old son Muhammad Reza (1919-1980, reigned from 1941 to 1979) as the new Shah.[10] While British forces controlled southern Iran and Soviet forces occupied the north, this period of foreign occupation paradoxically created an opening for new political and cultural possibilities. With Soviet support, autonomous socialist governments emerged in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan. However, these initiatives collapsed after Soviet forces withdrew from northern Iran under US and Iranian pressure.[11]

The occupation represented a stark departure from the previous era of state-

[10]Katouzian drew a parallel between Reza Shah's downfall and Napoleon III's defeat in 1870, noting that both rulers lost power as a result of foreign military occupation. Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Modern Iran*, 141.

[11]See Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*.

directed modernization under Reza Shah. During the 1920s and 1930s, Tehran had undergone comprehensive urban renewal following nineteenth-century European planning principles.[12] The capital's neighborhoods were reorganized into orthogonal patterns with major thoroughfares running north-south and east-west.[13] According to municipal records, the establishment of the main boulevards and streets occurred between the late 1920s and mid-1930s, facilitated by the Street Widening Act of 1933.[14] These urban transformations profoundly influenced a new generation of Iranian artists, who absorbed the geometric rationality and ordered spatial relationships of the modernized cityscape into their artistic vocabulary.[15]

With the abrupt transition from Reza Shah to his son, the state's aggressive modernization campaign temporarily receded, creating space for cultural ferment and democratic aspirations to emerge from below. As the strict controls of previous decades loosened, artists, poets, and intellectuals who had operated in the shadows now sought to forge innovative forms of expression that responded to Iran's rapidly changing urban fabric. Their work increasingly reflected both the promise and tensions of modernization, as they grappled with questions of tradition and progress in their artistic practice. The geometric abstractions and architectural motifs that emerged in Iranian modern art during this period bore witness to artists' lived experience of Tehran's transforming urban environment.

The artistic optimism of the late 1940s emerged during an interregnum when the

[12]Banani, *The Modernization of Iran, 1921-1941*, 145.

[13]See Kiyani, *The Architecture of Early Pahlavi (Me'mari Doreye Aval Pahalvi)*, 181.

[14]For example, major streets, including Cherahg-e Bargh St, Gomrok St, Youef Abad St, Estanbol St, Amiriy-e St and Ferdowsi Sq, were built during this period. See Kiyani, 37.

[15]For the impact of the new urban life on artists see Delzende, *Tahavolat-i Honar-i Iran*, 231–43.

newly installed Muhammad Reza Pahlavi wielded limited authority. This period of reduced state control fostered unprecedented opportunities for intellectual and artistic exploration. However, the creative energies unleashed during this time were soon curtailed. The 1953 coup d'état—orchestrated by British and American intelligence services—that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh marked the end of this cultural opening. In its aftermath, a state-sponsored modern art movement arose that aligned with the Pahlavi regime's vision of positioning Iran on the global stage. The Shah's consolidation of power, supported by an extensive security apparatus, including the newly established SAVAK (National Intelligence and Security Organization), transformed the landscape of cultural production.

The First Tehran Biennial in 1958 presaged a seismic shift in Iran's artistic landscape, reflecting broader economic changes that would profoundly alter cultural production.[16] In the following two decades, Iran underwent a rapid and uneven modernization process, driven by several key factors: the country's increasing integration into global markets, the sweeping transformation of its agricultural sector, and an overwhelming dependence on booming oil exports. This economic metamorphosis, fueled by petrodollars and guided by the state's development policies, unleashed powerful forces that reshaped not only Iran's socioeconomic structure but also its artistic expressions. As traditional modes of life and production gave way to new forms of labor and consumption, artists found themselves grappling with questions of identity, tradition, and modernity in an increasingly globalized context.

[16]Scholars has argued the significance of the biennials as a pivotal event. Combiz Moussavi-Aghdam, for example, identifies the origin of 'Iranian modernism' in the Tehran Biennials. Moussavi-Aghdam, "Art History, 'National Art' and Iranian Intellectuals in the 1960s," 137.

This dissertation examines the evolution of modern art in Iran from 1941 to 1979, a period marked by the nation's tumultuous transition from a predominantly agrarian society to one increasingly shaped by capitalist modes of production. This transformation unfolded against a backdrop of imperialist interventions, political upheaval, and cultural tensions, creating a complex milieu for artistic innovation. To illuminate the contradictions that shaped the relationship between cultural production and social life in this era, this study focuses on the works of three influential Iranian artists: Jalil Ziapour (1920–1999), Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937), and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922–2019).

As Iran navigated its transition to capitalist modernity, artists faced the particular challenges of creating work from within what can be characterized as "uneven development"—a concept first introduced by Leon Trotsky and later elaborated by Ernst Mandel and David Harvey to describe how capitalism's expansion generates inherent spatial and temporal disparities.[17] From the 1950s to 1970s, this unevenness manifested starkly in Iran: while petroleum revenues drove rapid modernization in urban centers like Tehran, rural regions remained bound to pre-capitalist modes of production. The Green Revolution did not alleviate existing contradictions; instead, it intensified them. Implemented through the Shah's White Revolution and supported by Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, this program of agricultural mechanization achieved selective modernization while simultaneously uprooting peasants and artisans from traditional livelihoods. This displacement generated what Marx identified as a "reserve army of labor" that gravitated toward urban peripheries, fun-

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damentally reshaping Iran's social fabric.

These conditions profoundly shaped artistic production in Iran. As new cultural institutions and patronage networks flourished in Tehran, traditional craft production and indigenous artistic practices faced displacement. Simultaneously, the response of Iranian artists to the contradictions of modernization evolved significantly. Earlier modernists like Ziapour had sought to penetrate the totality of fragmented social life through formal innovation.[18]

By the 1960s, artists increasingly turned their attention to Iran's internal "others" - tribal, rural, and traditional communities whose marginalization was produced by uneven capitalist development and the state's aggressive modernization policies. Their approach resembled Boasian participant observation in its surface emphasis on immersion in traditional cultures, though they never explicitly claimed this methodology. Tanavoli, for instance, worked with craftsmen in Tehran's southern quarters and incorporated their techniques into his modernist practice, yet the relationship remained one of patron-to-artisan rather than genuine cultural exchange. These artists maintained their elite (the professional-managerial class, so speaking) social status while selectively appropriating cultural forms from communities increasingly displaced by market forces. Their engagement with "traditional" cultures, while perhaps motivated by a genuine interest in preservation, ultimately served to authenticate their work for both domestic ruling class and international markets while obscuring the economic forces driving cultural transformation. This turn from universalist aspirations

[18]Blake Stimson aptly summarizes this tendency of the classic modernism: "rtists are concerned with form, and the primary formal problem they face is representing the governing model of supersensible transcendence, or the social and epistemological infrastructure of understanding and experiencing the world." Stimson, *Citizen Warhol*, 38.

to localized cultural exploration marked a significant reorientation in Iranian artistic practice—from attempting to construct a historical consciousness to preserving and re-enacting indigenous cultural forms within the perpetuity of the present.[19]

The period under study in this dissertation falls within what Michael Denning calls "the age of three worlds."[20] During this era, defined by the geopolitical division between the capitalist First World, the communist Second World, and the decolonizing Third World, culture assumed unprecedented significance as "a way of summarizing the ways in which groups distinguish themselves from other groups."[21] Culture expanded beyond its traditional association with elite literature and high arts and came to encompass all aspects of daily life and social practice. This shift marked a crucial change; culture now operated simultaneously as a field of political contestation, an instrument of national identity formation, and a mass-produced commodity. In this context, the process of cultural differentiation gained new urgency with the rise of nationalism and the spread of mass media. Denning captures this transformation in a striking passage: "Everyone discovered that culture had been mass-produced like Ford's cars; the masses had culture and culture had a mass."[22]

Third Worldism emerged in the aftermath of World War II initially as a series of nationalist independence movements across formerly colonized and underdeveloped nations. The 1950s witnessed pivotal manifestations of national projects led by charismatic leaders: Gamal Abdel Nasser's articulation of Arab nationalism in Egypt,

[19]For the anthropological conception of cultures, see Osborne, *Crisis as Form*.

[20]Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, 2.

[21]Immanuel Wallerstein, quoted in Denning, 140. Arif Dirlik describes the Third World as "a residual category, a dumping ground for all who did not qualify as capitalist or socialist," became a crucial battleground for cultural politics." Dirlik, "Spectres of the Third World," 136.

[22]Dirlik, "Spectres of the Third World," 136.

Jawaharlal Nehru's vision for an independent India, Sukarno in fighting against Dutch re-colonization efforts, and Mohammad Mosaddegh's steadfast commitment to economic sovereignty and the nationalization of oil. While these movements shared a fundamental commitment to national self-determination and opposition to colonial control, their trajectories diverged significantly by the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, the radical potential of early Third Worldism was increasingly contained by neo-colonization.[23] As Vijay Prashad argues, many post-colonial states adopted culturalist frameworks that celebrated tradition while implementing economic policies that deepened dependency on Western capital.[24] This shift from anti-colonial resistance to state-managed cultural difference aligned with American Cold War strategies, as emerging national elites were incorporated into US-led networks of cultural and economic exchange.

Within this shifting global configuration, the United States developed a distinctive approach to cultural diplomacy that strategically emphasized the recognition of cultural differences, distinguishing itself from European colonial powers' civilizing missions.[25] As Penny Von Eschen demonstrates, this "jazz ambassadorship" and celebration of cultural diversity served to deflect criticism of racial inequality within the US while advancing American interests abroad.[26] Christina Klein argues that the emphasis on cross-cultural understanding and "people-to-people" diplomacy helped legitimize American power through apparently more benign forms than European

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[24]Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

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[26]Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World*, 8–12.

colonialism.[27] In Chapter 3, I will analyze the implications of United States cultural diplomacy in Iran during the Cold War by investigating the patronage of American collector Abby Weed Grey and her collaboration with Iranian artists, particularly Tanavoli.

In Iran, in the aftermath of the 1953 coup that reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah, the pervasive influence of the United States on Iran during the era manifested at multiple levels, from the Pahlavi state's close political and military ties to Washington to the influx of American consumer goods, cultural products, and lifestyle ideals that transformed everyday life for many urban Iranians, creating a complex landscape of modernization and cultural hybridization that both fascinated and unsettled Iranian society.

In navigating Cold War geopolitics, the Shah crafted an ambivalent position within Third World politics. While maintaining close military and economic ties with the United States, viewing these relationships as crucial for Iran's security and economic development, the Shah drew intellectual inspiration from figures of decolonization like Léopold Sédar Senghor, who articulated theories of cultural synthesis between tradition and modernity. Like Senghor's concept of *négritude*, which proposed African cultural specificity while embracing aspects of modernization, the Shah promoted a vision of Iran as a unique civilization bridging East and West. This selective appropriation of Non-Aligned Movement ideals allowed the Pahlavi state to present its modernization program not as Westernization but as a distinctly Iranian path to development, compatible with the legacy of the Persian Empire.

[27]Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 49.

As I show in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, Tanavoli and Farmanfarmaian, in particular, reflect the foreclosure of revolutionary possibilities of the future after the coup and the search for coming to terms with Iran's uneven development As Chapter 3 established, Tanavoli's artistic stance was distinctive in its conscious rejection of Western canons and embrace of what he termed "*heech* ('nothingness' or 'nothing' in Farsi)." Unlike other Third World artists who struggled to either adopt or reject Western traditions, Tanavoli positioned himself at what he claimed was a "zero point" of sculpture. By embracing "*heech*," he transformed the very absence of a sculptural tradition in Islamic Iran from a limitation into a creative opportunity. This self-conscious positioning in a historical void allowed him to construct a new artistic vocabulary drawn from Iran's craft traditions and cultural forms. However, this turn to the archaic past was not simple revivalism—rather, it manifested what Fredric Jameson identifies as a crisis of historicity in postcolonial culture, where the relationship to history becomes spectral rather than organic. That is, the past in Tanavoli's work functions not as lived tradition but as a repository of forms and symbols to be reanimated in the present in perpetuity. Chapter 3 explores how Tanavoli navigated the contradictions of Americanization in the Iranian cultural landscape of the 1960s, all within the broader context of Iran's changing relationship with the West, particularly the United States, during the peak of decolonization in the Global South.

The incorporation of certain Iranian modernist artists, notably Tanavoli and Farmanfarmaian, into a new emerging professional-managerial class (PMC) during the late Pahlavi had its roots in developments traced in Chapter 2 through Jalil Ziapour's career. Ziapour's trajectory from avant-garde to state ethnographer exemplifies the

broader shift that occurred as artists were integrated into the Pahlavi state's administrative and cultural apparatus. His ethnographic work, undertaken while receiving state commissions in the post-coup era, marks a pivotal moment when artists who had once functioned as organic intellectuals were transformed into traditional intellectuals serving state institutions. This transition established a pattern that would shape the roles of subsequent artists like Tanavoli and Farmanfarmaian within Iranian society.

Chapter 4 examines Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian's artistic practice through the lens of her distinctive social position. Born into a merchant family and later married into the aristocratic Farmanfarmaian dynasty, she operated from within Iran's ruling class while forging her path as a female artist. Her work developed an aesthetic that reflected the technocratic incorporation of folk art and handicraft into modern Iranian art. This approach stemmed from her dual position: her privileged access to traditional artistic practices and indigenous communities on one hand, and her role in the state-sponsored preservation of these traditions on the other. Through Farmanfarmaian's career, the chapter illuminates how class status and gender shaped artistic innovation in late Pahlavi Iran, particularly in mediating between traditional crafts and modernist aesthetics.

1.3 The Genesis of New Art in Iran

The interregnum period (between Reza Shah's abdication in 1941 and the MI6/CIA-orchestrated coup in 1953) should be considered crucial in the formation of modernism, with its first public manifestation in 1946. Yet, this is in no way to say that modernist expressions were unprecedented before 1941; rather, it is to emphasize concerted

efforts made during this period against the backdrop of the power and structural shifts.[28] In this respect, for example, Iranian critic and writer Javad Mojabi argues that Abolhassan Seddighi might be considered among the early modernist painters in Iran.[29]

During his European sojourn, Seddighi's works began to show clear Post-Impressionist influences, particularly evident in his 1930 paintings of Venice's Saint Mark's Square and A Village near Florence (1930, fig.1.2). His break from academic conventions had begun even earlier, as demonstrated by his graduation project at the Sanaye Mostazrefe School in 1927, where he subtly but decisively departed from the institution's rigid academic standards. The painting juxtaposes three different modes of representation (fig.1.3): a portrait of Mary drawing on the long-established tradition of icon painting prevalent among Armenian communities in Iran, a profile of Ali Mohammad Heydarian (Seddighi's cohort and friend) likely drawn from a photograph, and Seddighi's self-portrait presumably drawn from life using a mirror. By juxtaposing these three modes of representation side by side, Seddighi not only showcases his technical versatility but also creates a visual dialogue about the nature of the painting itself and its correlation with reality. This early work hints at the emerging modernist sensibility in Iranian art, where artists began to question and experiment with established modes of representation and painting as a medium.

Iranian artists and critics of this era employed various terms to describe these

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[29]Mojabi, *Navad Sāl Noāvāri Dar Honar-i Tajassomi-yi Iran (Ninety Years of Innovation in Fine Arts)*, 2016, 2:257–58. Also see Mojabi, *Navad Sāl Noāvāri Dar Honar-i Tajassomi-yi Iran (Ninety Years of Innovation in Fine Arts)*, 2016, 1:13–14. Mojabi considers Sadeghi's A Portrait of the Sister (1925), an impressionist painting, the first example. He also suggested the Estensakh by Mahmoud Khan Saba, "Iran's first modern painting"

new artistic approaches, which were largely inspired by European Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. They frequently used "New Art" (*honar-e* no or *honar-e jadid*) and "modern art" interchangeably, highlighting the novelty of these artistic approaches against the entrenched brand of academic painting institutionalized by Kamal-ol-Molk.[30] Additionally, terms such as "progressive art" (honar-e nogara) and "contemporary art" (honar-e mo'aser) were utilized.[31]

Among many explorations of the notion of New Art in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the essay "Grasping Novelty (*shenakht-e no-vi*)" (1949) by avant-garde poet, playwright, and critic Hasan Shirvani is particularly insightful. Shirvani elucidates how the modern world's material conditions due to the industrialization of agriculture call for fresh artistic and cultural forms in the midst of the 20th century for Iranian artists. He points out that peasants who perform manual labor to cultivate the land would readily appreciate the advantages of shifting from traditional to industrial agriculture, while intellectuals, accustomed to traditional practices, may be slower to recognize or even resist the benefits of a new era (since they don't face immediate material consequences).[32] Indeed, the stunning urban population growth within three decades or more split the population evenly into urban and non-urban.[33] Shervani anticipates that ultimately, material and economic factors will drive cultural

[30]This usage parallels how modernists in the European context during the 1910s and 1920s simply employed "the new art" ("*el arte nuevo*" or "*die neue Kunst*") in other contexts. Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, 21.

[31]Today, honar-e nogara is often used to mean modern art. Mojabi draws a distinction between For him, nowgarayi transpired with the Constituition Revolutuon in art and literature and it was an urge to challenge and change "established traditions." Mojabi, *Navad Sāl Noāvāri Dar Honar-i Tajassomi-yi Iran (Ninety Years of Innovation in Fine Arts)*, 2016, 1:13.

[32]In a sense, culture follows the material changes although with certain delays.

[33]

acceptance of the new.[34]

Art historian Alice Bombardier argues that the first generation of Iranian modernists, whom she refers to as "pioneers" following Mojabi, confronted what she terms a 'double transition (une double transition)'.[35] The first transition was institutional: the shift from Kamal-ol-Molk's School of Fine Arts (*Madreseh-ye sanaye-e Mostazrafeh*, est. 1911) to the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran. The second was aesthetic: artists developed what she—following the artists—terms "New Painting" (naqqashi-e jadid or naqqashi-e now), characterized by increasingly abstract figuration that marked a decisive break from academic pictorial traditions.[36]

Institutionally, New Art gathered steam in the Faculty of Fine Art at the University of Tehran.[37] The teaching cadre at the Faculty of Fine Arts was composed of academicists who received their education at Kamal-ol-Molk's School of Fine Arts. Hasan Ali Vaziri, Esmail Ashtiani, and Abolhassan Sadighi were among the important instructors trained in academic painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts. Conceivably, the majority of them resisted modernism.[38] heir students, however, assiduously experimented with various technical and visual lexicons developed by European modernism—drew inspiration from Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism—in their own way as part of the New Art movement.

In her analysis of modern art during this period, Bombardier makes an astute

[34]shervaniGraspingNoveltyShenakhte2021[70]

[35]Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran*, 27.

[36]Bombardier, "The Pioneers of Iranian New Painting," 99.

[37]Mojabi claims the Faculty of Fine Arts was the birthplace of modern Iranian art. Mojabi, *Navad Sāl Noāvāri Dar Honar-i Tajassomi-yi Iran (Ninety Years of Innovation in Fine Arts)*, 2016, 1:35.

[38]Perhaps with the exception of Seddighi.

observation about the overlooked intersections between New Poetry (*she'r-e no*) and New Painting (*naqqāshi-ye no*), a connection that has received little attention in existing scholarship.[39] "The two [New Painting and New Poem] currents converge and tend to develop together," with literature having an edge over other arts, notes Bombardier.[40] Bombardier points out that the profound pictorial innovations of this period were contingent upon constructing a public through the demarcation of exhibition spaces, organization of debates, and publication of journals.[41] This crucial observation warrants further exploration, which I undertake in discussing the 1946 Exhibition of Fine Arts. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, these artists operated without established patronage systems–a limitation they transformed into an opportunity to define modern art on their own terms. Through close analysis of archival materials and artworks from the exhibition, I trace how the first generation of modernist artists in Iran strategically engaged audiences and institutions to gain recognition for their innovations.

To fully appreciate the significance of these artists' break from traditional patronage systems, it is essential to understand the historical context from which they emerged. The Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 anticipated the coming shift in Iranian cultural history by beginning to challenge aristocratic control over cultural production. Prior to this period, as Terry Eagleton notes of traditional societies, cul-

[39]Bombardier, "The Pioneers of Iranian New Painting." It is worth noting that while Bombardier's focus on New Painting provides valuable insights, it ultimately constrains her analysis. By concentrating primarily on painting—admittedly the most contested medium of the time—she overlooks the broader context of negotiations surrounding the institution of art and artistic production as a whole.

[40]Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran*, 47.

[41]Bombardier, "The Pioneers of Iranian New Painting," 99.

ture primarily "served as an instrument of political and religious sovereignty," with artists working as "court poets, genealogists, licensed fools, painters and architects patronised by the landed gentry."[42] The Iranian royal court maintained this system through the patronage of manuscript illustration, poetry, and architecture. The royal atelier—and sometimes the local ateliers established by the regional governors—funded and supervised the production of a majority of illustrations, through which the aristocracy expressed their taste and splendor.[43] In these studios, illustrated manuscripts, more often the heroic Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) or the courtly Khamseh, were the result of collaboration between painters, bookbinders, gilders, and calligraphers.

The epochal shift in Persian visual culture reached its zenith under Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh's sovereignty (1848-1896), whom scholars dubbed "the photographer king."[44] This shift stemmed from burgeoning European trade relations and cross-cultural exchange. The monarch's fervent embrace of photography, coupled with the aristocracy's mounting preference for true-to-life depictions, hastened the demise of long-enstablished manuscript illustration. This paradigm shift forced artists, bereft of royal patronage, to seek sustenance from merchant classes flourishing in the bazaars of Tehran and Isfahan.[45] The last manuscript illustration supported by the Qajar royal atelier was One Thousand and One Nights (Hezār-o-yek Shab), which was executed between 1885 and 1892 by Abul Hasan Khan Ghaffari Kashani (1814–66).[46]

[42]Eagleton, "Terry Eagleton · Where Does Culture Come From?"

[43]#todo

[44]Ṭahmāsbpūr, *Nāṣir-ad-Dīn, šāh-i ᶜakkās*.

[45]#todo

[46]Muhammad Shah (1834-1848) noticed Ghaffari's talent and sent him to Italy to study classical art and Renaissance masters. Upon his return, Nāṣer al-Dīn Shāh appointed him to be the chief

Ghaffari's nephew Mohammad Ghaffari (1848-1940), later known as Kamal-ol-Molk, not only decisively moved away from Persian courtly painting toward European oil painting with the Shah's enthusiastic support, but more significantly, his establishment of the School of Fine Arts in 1911, first of its kind, marked an unprecedented milestone in Iranian art education—creating the very institutional paradigm that would paradoxically become the target of the 1940s avant-garde movement's rebellion.

The Constitutional Revolution accelerated what Eagleton identifies as a key historical transition—the movement of cultural production from court patronage into the marketplace.[47] This shift had contradictory effects, especially for the coming generation of modernist artists in the 1940s: while it deprived artists of guaranteed patronage, it also granted them new forms of autonomy. As cultural works became commodities rather than instruments of sovereignty, artists could begin to operate independently of court tastes and controls, opening possibilities for critique and innovation.[48]

In the immediate post-war era, the year 1946 holds a significant place as it marks

painter of the royal court (naqqashbashi) and gave him the title Sani-ol-Molk. In 1861, Sani-ol-Molk played a significant part in opening a department of painting (*Naghashikhaneh*) at the school of Dar-ol-Fonoun where he trained many artists including his nephew Mohammad Ghaffari (Kamal-ol-Molk).

[47]Important to consider the movement from the royal ateilar to the market was under way from the Safavid period. The popularity of single page painting played a key role in the transition. A significant change in Persian art occurred during the Qajar dynasty (1786–1925) with the growing contacts with Europe and the rise of photography.

[48]The revolutionary period introduced new imperatives to address everyday experience and common life in literature, particularly through the Literary Revolution (*Enghelab-e Adabi*) that championed simplified language and quotidian themes. This democratizing impulse in literature, which sought to make cultural expression accessible beyond aristocratic circles, established important precedents for the modernist movements that would emerge in both poetry and painting by the 1940s. See Bombardier, *Les pionniers de la Nouvelle peinture en Iran*.

the beginning of New Art and the emergence of modern art criticism in Iran. This was the first time modernist artists showcased their works publicly, garnering considerable media attention. Additionally, that same year, the Congress of Writers and Poets officially recognized New Poetry. I am not suggesting that there was no writing about art prior to this date, but I want to emphasize that the wide circulation of reviews regarding this exhibition in publications was unprecedented.

Drawing a compelling parallel with French art history, one might consider how the 1946 Fine Arts exhibition thrust Iranian modernist artists into the national consciousness, much as the 1863 *Salon des Refusés* had revolutionized the Parisian art world by showcasing non-conventional artists and inspiring critical discourse from luminaries such as Charles Baudelaire and Emile Zola. Furthermore, just as the Impressionists established their autonomous exhibition spaces in the wake of the 1863 salon, the proponents of New Art in Iran carved out their independent venue shortly after the watershed moment of 1946.

The Soviet Union played a pivotal role in nurturing early modernist movements in Iran following World War II, offering vital support to a generation of artists who lacked both state sponsorship and public recognition.[49]Through the Soviet All-Union Society for Cultural Ties Abroad (VOKS), the USSR implemented sophisticated cultural diplomacy campaigns promoting socialist modernity. These efforts found particular resonance among Iranian intellectuals who saw in Soviet republics like Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan compelling models for developing a distinctly Persianate form of socialist

[49]Bombardier, 29.

modernity.[50]

The genesis of New Art in Iran can be traced to 1946, when the Iranian Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (ISCR, *Anjoman-e Ravabet-e Farhangi-ye Iran va Shoravi*) organized the Exhibition of Fine Arts of Iran. The ISCR, established through Sa'ed Nafisi's request to the Academy of Iran (*Farhangestān-e Iran*) in collaboration with VOKS, experienced meteoric growth—opened branches in Mashhad, Tabriz, Rasht, and Kermanshah—but ultimately proved unsustainable.[51] The society's dissolution in 1955 stemmed from multiple factors: the implausibility of implementing Soviet-style socialism in Iran, the Azerbaijan crisis, and insufficient backing from both Soviet and Iranian authorities. Nevertheless, despite its brief existence, the ISCR stands as a "an early case study of Soviet soft power in the Third World."[52]

In concert with the Iranian communist Tudeh Party, the ISCR emerged as a magnetic force for the nation's preeminent intelligentsia, drawing into its orbit distinguished literati, poets, and academicians—eminent writers like Sadeq Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi, Sadeq Chubak, and Gholam-Hossein Saedi; poets Ahmad Shamlu and Nima Youshij; theater directors like Abdolhossein Noshin; film directors like Ebrahim Golestan; and art critics like Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Notably, this intellectual ferment transcended artistic boundaries, encompassing professionals from jurispru-

[50]Pickett, "Soviet Civilization Through a Persian Lens."

[51]Other notable intellectuals who contributed to the establishment of the society includes Malek-ol-Shoaraye Bahar and Fatemeh Sayyah. #todo In Pickett's assessment, Nafisi embodied the intersection of two distinct modernizing forces: the Soviet Union's wartime campaign to propagate its particular vision of progress, and Iranian intellectuals' earnest pursuit of a modernization pathway that would harmonize with their cultural heritage. This confluence exemplified how disparate modernizing impulses could align in unexpected ways through the agency of key historical figures. Pickett, 805–6.

[52]Pickett, 806.

dence, medicine, and technical fields, creating a truly interdisciplinary movement that would shape Iran's political and cultural landscape.[53] As The Times observed, Tudeh drew "the most talented and the best educated of the young generation."[54]

==The Exhibition of Fine Arts of Iran was held at the Palace of Shahpour Gholamreza Pahlavi from February 5 to March 30, 1946, and it included sections on painting, decorative arts, and architecture.[55] Among the organizers of the event were Maryam Firouz (1914-2008), the leader of the Tudeh-affiliated Women's Democratic Organization (*Tashkilāt-e Demokrātik-e Zanān*, est. 1943), Hamid Sayyah (1885-1968), a diplomat, G.M. Kalish'ian, the VOKS commissioner (*upolnomochennyi*) in Iran, and a Russian painter.[56] This landmark exhibition assembled an impressive collection of 730 artworks created by 125 artists.[57] Reportedly, the exhibition attracted overwhelming numbers of visitors from multiple demographics and all backgrounds, "intellectuals, college students, students, blue-collar and white-collar workers, businessmen … [as well as] veiled women."[58] The exhibition was deemed "one of the most significant cultural and artistic events in Iran in the mid-twentieth century" and "a

[53]Other honorable mentions: Said Nafisi, Mehdi Bamdad, Muhammad Tamaddon, Moerteza Ravandi, Yahyi Aryanpour, Hussein Lhair-khaw Parviz Khanlari, Nader Naderpour, Muhammad Tafazolli, Muhammad Mo'in, Siavash Kasrai. Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*.

[54]Quoted in Abrahamian #todo

[55]#todo

[56]#todo

[57]Of particular significance was Banu magazine's coverage of the exhibition, which drew special attention due to the inclusion of women artists among the exhibitors. The magazine's reportage highlighted this progressive element of female artistic participation, marking it as a noteworthy cultural development.

[58]Reported by Payam-e No magazine cited in Arianrad, "Karname-i Anjoman-i Ravabet-i Farhang-i Iran Ba Etehad Jamahir-i Shoravi [A Report on the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries." R.R. Makaroff, a Soviet musician who probably received an invitation from ISCR, published his observation in Dowlat-e Iran's press on March 7, 1946 (corresponding to the 46th of Esfand, 1324 in the Iranian calendar), suggested that the exhibition drew between 2,500 and 3,500 daily visitors.

new gate to the life of Iranian society."[59] The extraordinary public response caught the attention of governmental authorities, and this success catalyzed the organization of subsequent exhibitions in 1950, 1952, and 1953.[60]

==Reza Jorjani and Fatemeh Sayyah reviewed the exhibition. Jorjani considers the exhibition "the first step in introducing Iranian artists."[Az matne honar 41] More significantly, Jorjani saw in New Art the potential to transcend what he perceived as an outdated romantic sensibility:

[59] *Payam-e No*, series 2, no. 10, July 1946 (*mordad 1325*), 2; and Hamedi, Mohammad Hassan, *Iranian Art through Time (Honar-e Iran dar gozar-e zaman)*, 433. Cited in Aryanpour, "The Record of the Iranian Society for Cultural relations with the USSR, Part 1 (Karnameh-ye Anjoman-e ravabete farhangi iran ba ettehad-e jamahir-e shoravi)," 41.

[60] In the last exhibition, 130 paintings—by the artists such as Hossein Behzad, Mohsen Soheili, Abbas Katouzian, and Esfandiar Ahmadiye—were on display.

2. Ziapour: The Last Cubist

3. Parviz Tanavoli

4. Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

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Figure 1.1: Khorus Jangi magazine cover by Jalil Ziapour (1949)

Figure 1.2: Adbolhassan Sadeghi, A Village near Florence, 1930, oil on canvas, 35 x 45 cm. (13.8 x 17.7 in.)

Figure 1.3: Abolhassan Seddighi

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