

**Title: Book Reviews Contemporary Iranian Rt From the Street to the Studio**

*Author: Talinn Grigor*

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## Book Reviews

### *Contemporary Iranian Art: From the Street to the Studio*

By Talinn Grigor

London: Reaktion Books, 2014

Softcover, 296 pages, 174 illustrations, 164 in colour

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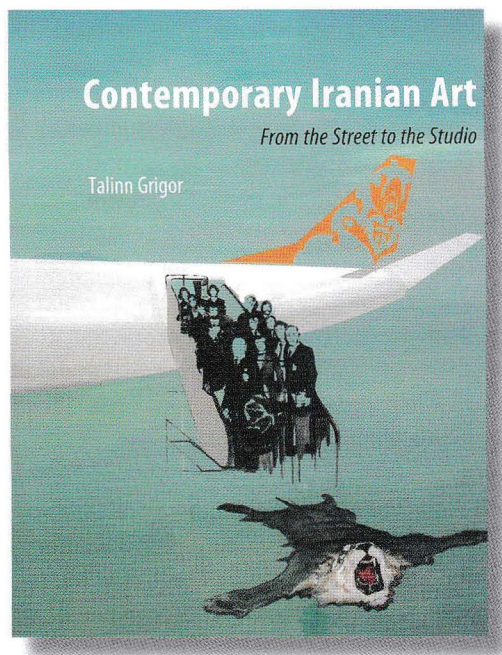
Price: £25

Since the late 1980s, the contemporary art world has extended beyond the fringes of 'Western art' and moved towards the exploration of new geographies, recognizing artistic practice in regions that have been ignored by art historians, critics and curators alike. One of the art scenes that has witnessed a surge of interest in recent years is that of Iran and the Persian Gulf. Iranian modern and contemporary visual culture is vibrant, aesthetically diverse and technically dynamic, and a reflection of the turbulent socio-cultural and political atmosphere, which became the core of Iranian artistic practice.

This book presents a critical perspective on the history of Iranian visual culture since the 1978–79 Revolution. It is divided into three parts—'The Street', 'The Studio' and 'The Exile'—providing a comprehensive study of art under the regime of the Islamic Republic; of the art scene, from its creation in the studios to its display in public galleries and museums; and of the transcultural dialogue of Iranian artists in the diaspora, and discussing the ideologies, institutions and individuals involved through the lens of the conceptual dichotomies of high art/light art, private/public domains and expression/censorship.

In the prologue, the author explains the study's structure and scope. 'The Street' deals with the official art commissioned by the Islamic Republic, linking ideology and the public domain; 'The Studio' relates to the avant-garde, manifested by artists in the private domain of galleries and museums; and the third section focuses on diasporic artistic activity, both within the immigrant communities and in conversation with the Western art scene.

Presenting a historicized perspective on Iran's visual culture, the author posits that during the two periods before the establishment of the



Islamic Republic in 1979, the Qajar and the Pahlavi constructed a utopian monument to the Persian legacy, from the Achaemenids to the Safavids, to promote an anti-colonial dominion. However, she emphasizes that during the 50 years of Pahlavi rule there was nevertheless a strong commitment to modernize Iran, taking the Western world as a reference.

The first chapter, 'The Street', focuses on the ideological agenda of revolutionary art to obliterate the secular and modernist environment established by the Pahlavi under the influence of Western culture. The author distinguishes an aesthetic shift within four political periods (p. 23).



First, under the leadership of Imam Khomeini, revolutionary art, categorized by the author as populist and propagandistic, followed the language of academic realism to re-educate the masses based on Shi'a-Iranian moral principles and rejection of the monarchy and Western culture. Then, during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the agenda was the reconstruction of the Shi'a-Iranian Islamic community. Between 1997 and 2005, President Khatami initiated a reform movement towards artistic freedom, internationalization of the arts and urban beautification, along with the revitalization of state museums and the opening of several galleries. Lastly, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his conservative regime, the Iranian art scene became more lethargic.

The author relates the initial stage of Iran's revolutionary street art to the revolutionary and anti-colonial traditions in the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and Mexico. This stage is marked by a spirit of freedom and by clandestine activity, such as the use of graffiti, posters and other forms of street art intervention, which then evolved into official murals. Their subject-matter was mostly related to anti-US propaganda, the *faqih* or jurist's guardianship of the Supreme Leader Imam Khomeini, the export of the Iranian Revolution and support for international Muslim causes, and the development of Shi'a iconography and martyrology in the context of the Iran-Iraq War.

As Grigor underlines, there appears to have been two distinct arenas in the public domain: one amongst the population, which developed spontaneously and anonymously, vibrant in its visual communication; and the other more institutionalized, which involved the reconfiguration of public spaces. She relates the swing towards a more institutionalized revolutionary art to the international political arena in the context of the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988 and the internationalization of Iran's Revolution to include other Islamic countries in the Persian Gulf.

Grigor sees a political shift in the arts of the revolution during what is called the Second Republic (1989–2005). She identifies a series of murals representing a new pictorial discourse focused on Iran-Iraq War veterans as a celebration of their sacrifice in the name of the Revolution, which commemorate the veterans' survival and resistance. She also identifies the rise of a new category of murals in the early 2000s in connection with urban

development and the continuous reconstruction of Tehran, moving away from martyrdom and *faqih* to a new pictorial discourse of resistance characterized by the illusion of a three-dimensional space and the employment of *trompe l'oeil* techniques.

The second chapter discusses the significant aesthetic shifts in artistic production within the studios and the emergence of a new generation of artists during the Second Republic. This chapter examines the duality of the public and private spheres, the instrumentalization of painting in the context of the cultural revolution, the abandonment of a core revolutionary discourse towards the development of avant-garde groups who paid attention to international vanguards, and the creation of boundaries between self-censorship and

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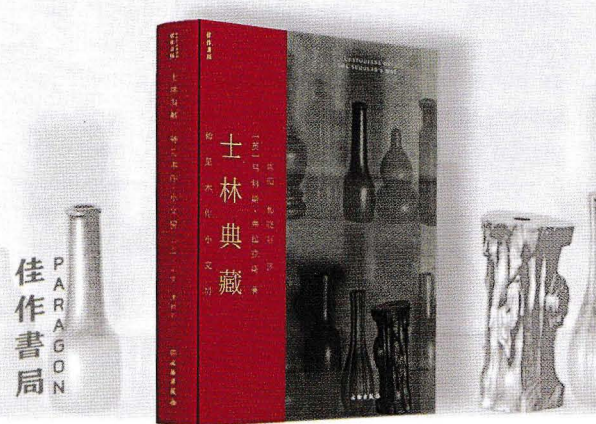
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CUSTODIANS OF THE SCHOLAR'S WAY

Chinese Scholar's Objects in Precious Woods

MARCUS FLACKS




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490 PAGES, HARDCOVER  
OVER 300 COLOR AND  
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tolerated and banned art. The author also highlights the growing diaspora of artists 'forced' into exile as a result of political and religious shifts in the Islamic Republic.

As part of the political agenda and the search for a true Iranian identity, artists condemned the mimicking of Western art and encouraged Islamic abstraction and the pursuit of 'spiritual-intuitive' art. Grigor suggests that in the mid-1980s, art schools were instrumental in revamping the educational structure to divorce art and politics and to 'cleanse' the Western influences popular during the Pahlavi regime. She also discusses the importance of documentary photography as a 'weapon' to fight for the 'integrity of the Islamic Republic' and to develop a culture of martyrdom (p. 110).

The second part of the second chapter looks at the dichotomy between the private and the public space in the context of government-owned galleries, museums, nationalized palaces, private galleries and artists' studios. In regard to the public display of art in state-owned galleries and museums, the author argues that although the government acts as the custodian of moral behaviour, censorship can never be absolute. Even Western art is at times displayed. The criteria of censorship are vague and in constant flux. Based on interviews with Iranian artists, Grigor demonstrates the strong links between censorship and artistic production; censorship does not forbid an artist to create an artwork but simply determines whether it can be displayed in public, generating a proliferation of private galleries and an increase in private exhibitions organized by artists' studios. The author also suggests that economically privileged, socially emancipated and educated women have played a significant role in the establishment of private galleries. A great majority of these galleries have been managed by women and served 'as the liminal spaces that negotiate the complexity of the relation between the public domain and the art world' (p. 140).

The third and final chapter concentrates on the artistic production of Iranian artists in exile, largely in North America and Western Europe. The author examines the cultural dialogues and the sense of exilic in-betweenness of Iranian artists who feel detached from both their home and host countries. In their diasporic artistic discourse, Grigor sees a different picture of Iran and Iranian identity from that of the Islamic Republic. This contested truth is neither Western nor 'Islamic' in the sense that it is not

substantiated by a Western perspective or directly affected by the agenda of the cultural revolution steered by the Islamic Republic.

The author points to several reasons for the integration of the Iranian diasporic artistic community into the international art scene, such as the importance of the Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War in world politics, the oil boom in the 2000s, which contributed to the generation of an artistic patronage in the Persian Gulf states, and the 'poignant questions about fragmented identities, gender equality, diasporic loss and historical reflexivity' that Iranian visual culture imposed both inside and outside Iran (p. 166).

The last section of the chapter analyses the 'reconciliation' between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian artistic community in diaspora, especially since the efforts made in the late 1990s by President Khatami to initiate a cultural dialogue. The author relates the restructuring of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art during Khatami's first term in office to the international development of Iranian contemporary art. She further notes the escalation of interest in Iranian contemporary artists on the part of scholars, curators and critics after a major exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London (2001) and another in at the Meridian International Center in Washington, DC (2002). Grigor suggests that the packaging of Iranian contemporary art by the international art market as 'Iranian and Arab art' or 'contemporary Middle Eastern art' followed on from this greater exposure.

Talinn Grigor's book gives an authoritative overview of contemporary Iranian art after the Revolution, analysing tensions between artistic practice in the studios, the fabrication of a new iconography and the instrumentalization of art in the service of politics, and the dislocation of a diasporic artistic community. It offers an in-depth perspective on the surge of interest in new geographies of visual culture and the intense effect that world politics and political and religious propaganda exert on artistic production, and on the rise of new opportunities in the international art market.

*Rui Oliveira Lopes*

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## *Monks in Glaze: Patronage, Kiln Origin and Iconography of the Yixian Luohans*

By Eileen Hsiang-Ling Hsu

Boston: Brill, 2016

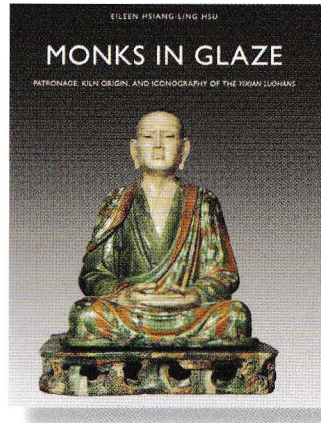
Hardcover, 269 pages, over 130 colour illustrations

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Price: US\$139

Among the many works of Chinese sculpture in museums today, the Yixian *luohan* ('arhats') are remarkable: they are slightly larger than life-size hand-modelled ceramic images of Buddhist holy men seated on rock-like platforms and covered in a *sancai*, or three-colour, glaze. Anyone who has wandered into the Chinese galleries at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, not to mention the Musée Guimet in Paris, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto or the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, has undoubtedly passed by one of this group of ten extant sculptures, if not been drawn to it—their portrait-like visages compel the visitor to come closer. Yet while many have seen these works, few have studied them. Eileen Hsiang-Ling Hsu's work *Monks in Glaze: Patronage, Kiln Origin and Iconography of the Yixian Luohans* now fills this gap.

Combining earlier work done by independent scholar Richard Smithies and Derek Gillman, formerly the executive director of the Barnes Foundation, with newly found textual sources and her own fieldwork at the Yixian site in Hebei province, Hsu takes the reader through the process of production of the images, argues for a specific patron, and gives a logical rationale for their unusual placement in caves high in the hills 150 kilometres outside of Beijing. Along the way, she weaves in the story of their initial discovery by the German explorer Friedrich Perzyński (1877–1965) at the turn of the 20th century, stripping away the layers of his own misinformation and later misinterpretations to lay bare some basic truths about the *luohan*. Hsu convincingly argues for a new dating for the grouping from the earlier Liao (907–1125) or Jin (1115–1234) dynasty to the much later Ming dynasty (1368–1644), wrapping her evidence in a broader discussion of some largely unstudied ceramic architectural works known as *liuli* from the Yuan (1271–1368), Ming and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Correctly asserting the use of this term for glaze or 'anything with a glass-like surface', Hsu notes that the term *liuli* long predates the term *sancai*, which only came into common usage in the early 20th century with the advent of the antiquities



trade in Tang dynasty (618–907) ceramics (p. 39). Her new dating of the Yixian works is further supported by recent chemical analysis and newly found stele texts, all of which are discussed in Chapter 1. Hsu outlines the history of *liuli* in Chapter 2, after which she moves on to an in-depth study of Ming dynasty tricolour-glazed ceramic sculptural works in Chapter 3, covering a broad range of materials from roof tiles and roofline sculptures to freestanding works. In her final two chapters, Hsu revisits the history and iconography of the *luohan* cult in China and seeks to identify each of the extant Yixian *luohan* by comparing them to other contemporaneous painted and sculpted works.

*Monks in Glaze* is scholarly in tone yet highly readable. Hsu brings to light new materials relevant to acquiring a better understanding of the history behind these unique works. The most important is a marble stele dated 1519 that was recently discovered near the Yixian caves and outlines a 'great donation' made by a member of the local military elite, Song Jun (p. 27). Song Jun is posited as the major donor of the Yixian *luohan* group, his unique position within the Yizhou garrison enabling him not only to produce the set at a government kiln site, but also to aid in transporting the statues from the kiln site to the caves. Hsu also discusses the private industry of ceramic production during the Ming, in particular the possibility for ceramicists to work part-time to satisfy public demand for goods in lieu of corvée labour (p. 65), and by outlining the family-



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