

Meeting a Persian Master: Interview with Reza Derakshani

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Artist Reza Derakshani

At first glance, the large canvases look like abstract fusions of pink, blue, or pale green. But look more closely and you'll see hunters, horsemen, pomegranates, and lines of poetic verse scrawled in Persian script.

These are the works of the Iranian master painter [Reza Derakshani](#). Born in a mountainous area of eastern Iran, the artist now lives on the other side of the planet: in Austin, Texas. (He dropped the first 'h' from the spelling of his last name 'Derakhshani' to make it easier for Westerners to read and pronounce).



Hunting Red, 2016. Oil on canvas 187 x 203 cm (73 5/8 x 79 7/8 inches)

Derakshani, one of Iran's most prominent living artists, has just opened an exhibition, "Hunting the Light" at the [Sophia Contemporary Gallery](#) in London (ending March 10). His works can otherwise be found in the collections of New York's [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) and of the [British Museum](#). They regularly fetch six-digit sums in the world's major auction houses.

Derakshani has been drawing and painting since he was a little boy growing up in [Sangsar](#), northeastern Iran. The son of a livestock farmer, he led a nomadic existence as a child; every year, for five whole months, the family lived out of a large tent at the foot of the Kopet Dagh Range on the Iran-Turkmenistan border. These spectacular plains and foothills form the backdrop in many of Derakshani's paintings, which are inspired by Persian miniatures, and dotted with horses, riders and ancient trees.

In person, Derakshani is soft-spoken and unshowy, never one to draw attention to himself. Slim and youthful-looking for a man in his early sixties, he wears sharply cut suits, with his only touch of eccentricity: the colorful Texan cowboy boots that he's fond of wearing.

Few artists discover their vocation as early as Derakshani. Following the example of a gifted older brother, young Reza was surprised to discover at the age of eight that he, too, could draw. The revelation came one fine day when he produced an ink sketch of his schoolteacher. "She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen," he recalled in an interview. "The portrait came out looking like a photograph. So I realized that this was something I could do."

Word of the boy's exceptional gift spread around the school and around the local community. People came knocking and commissioning him to produce copies of Western artworks: from paintings in [The Louvre](#) by [David](#) and [Ingres](#), to more mundane images found in Russian art books. It was a welcome source of revenue for the family; by that point, the children's father had gone bankrupt and departed.

Derakshani recalled how, one summer, he was confined to the house to copy 13 war paintings packed with horses and human figures. The constant obligation to paint was tough for a boy of his age. Yet it also gave him an early sense of discipline. That discipline would subsequently lead him to choose art as a lifelong pursuit, "when I could have become a singer, or developed one of the many other passions that I had."

A national competition organized by the government served as a fantastic springboard for the boy. The Ramsar competition – a multi-disciplinary contest akin to "America's Got Talent" – gave out prizes annually in a variety of disciplines. The young Reza won gold medals for five consecutive years in a range of visual art categories.

Further validation came at the age of 19, when he started his art studies at the [University of Tehran](#) and simultaneously exhibited in group shows at Tehran art galleries. When he wasn't attending class, the young man went around Tehran with a sketchbook, drawing people in cafes or on the street. At night, while the rest of the students were fast asleep, he would be busy producing artworks that he could show and sell through the galleries.

In 1977, a year before the start of the Revolution, he moved to Pasadena, California to continue his art studies. The university he attended placed a lot of emphasis on graphic and industrial design, which didn't suit the young student. Besides, he felt a terrible longing for Iran: for the family he had left behind, but also for the color of the sky, the sounds and the smells, and even the untidy streets. So a year after the Revolution, "I suddenly got sentimental and moved back to Iran."

For a while, he taught art at his old university – before it was shut down by the government. He also continued to paint and draw. "All artists at the time were making revolutionary work, painting clenched fists and angry demonstrations, or producing poor copies of Mexican political art," he recalled. "Being something of a contrarian, I made paintings of nature. I enjoyed it a lot, and traveled all over the country."

Yet gradually, it became difficult to live and work as an artist in Iran. Sketching in the park aroused suspicion; Derakshani was sometimes taken into custody for it, and held for a few days. It soon became evident that it was time for him to leave the country, painful though it was. With \$500 in his pocket, he left the homeland, accompanied by his wife and 11-year-old son. He spent a year on a transit visa in Italy, then moved to the U.S., eventually settling in New York in 1985.

Initially, he earned a living through music – playing the **Tar** and the **Setar**, both easily portable stringed instruments, whereas painting required access to a studio, which was difficult and expensive.



Shirin and Khosrow, 2016. Oil on canvas, 187 x 204 cm (73 5/8 x 80 1/4 Inches)

Yet the compulsion to paint soon got the better of him, and he went back to his original passion. He was determined to develop a style and signature of his own, but that would take time. So he started producing works inspired by Western art – abstract or figurative paintings that had “no relation to being Iranian.”

“And yet you can’t hide your origins: you can’t run away from them,” he explained. “I realized that it was better for me to incorporate my history and culture in my artistic practice. That’s when I started providing a modern interpretation of Persian miniatures.”

He immersed himself in miniatures, initially making **inkjet prints** of them which he then painted over, then making large-scale paintings inspired by the genre. He also introduced Persian carpet designs in his works. Slowly but surely, the visual culture of Iran seeped into his art.

As of 2002, Derakshani decided to head back to the homeland once again, and to spend more time in Iran. He kept a studio there and traveled regularly back and forth in what were some of the most productive and invigorating years of his life. Yet as the political context became more and more restrictive, Derakshani realized, once and for all, that he no longer belonged there.

"To me, the most important part of art is freedom: the freedom to express oneself, and to create work," he said. "There's no logic in saying that where there are constraints and limitations, there is artistic growth."

"One of the things that happens when you stay in Iran is that you start censoring yourself," he added. "The consequences are terrifying."

So he relocated to the U.S., this time for good. And he set up a base in Austin, where the weather and light were ideal, where he was away from the big city (which he could no longer stand), and where he could have large studios for painting, sculpture and music-making.

Today, there is "a great interest, from the outside, in seeing what's happening artistically in Iran, because the doors are closed politically," Derakshani explained. The international art world is finally taking an interest in "art as art, and not because there's a woman in a chador represented in it."

Still, "the reality is that a lot of what's going on around art in Iran right now is not of a high visual caliber," he said. "Much of it looks like Western art, both technically and in terms of content."

He warned that Iranian artists would not be in fashion forever, and recalled that so many Russian artists who were the rage before the collapse of the Berlin wall were now completely forgotten.

"Once the doors of Iran open completely, I can guarantee you that a lot of this attention will go away, and that few artists will prevail," he concluded. Suffice it to say that Reza Derakshani will most certainly be one who will.