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Out of the shadows

Formerly hidden by political isolation and frowned upon by its theocratic leaders, **Jake Kerridge** discovers how Iran's art scene is now ready to rise and shine

At the beginning of the year, international sanctions on Iran were lifted in an historic deal. For the art world this should be very welcome news. Pontus Silfverstolpe, who along with Christopher Barnekow co-founded online auction listing site Barnebys, is one of many art and antiques experts who believe that a global explosion of interest in Iranian art is imminent, as part of a "greater openness towards Iranian culture" in the West.

He admits to a fascination with Iranian art. "It is always interesting to follow art in dynamic regions because it has the ability to communicate much more than beauty," says Mr Silfverstolpe. "From art, you can listen to a country's heart, how it beats."

He thinks Iran's political isolation may have contributed to the unique quality of its art. "Art scenes that have not had the opportunity to be affected from the outside have a different kind of dynamic," he points out.

The Iranian market is already one of the strongest in the Middle East, and the seeds of the boom were sown at the turn of the century, under the more liberal regime of President Khatami.

Museums flourished in Iran in this period, as did artistic coalitions such as the Neda group, made up of women artists including Farideh Lashai. The government offered grants and subsidies that enabled substantial exhibitions of Iranian art to be held in the West for the first time, notably *Contemporary Iranian Art*, at the Barbican Centre in 2001.

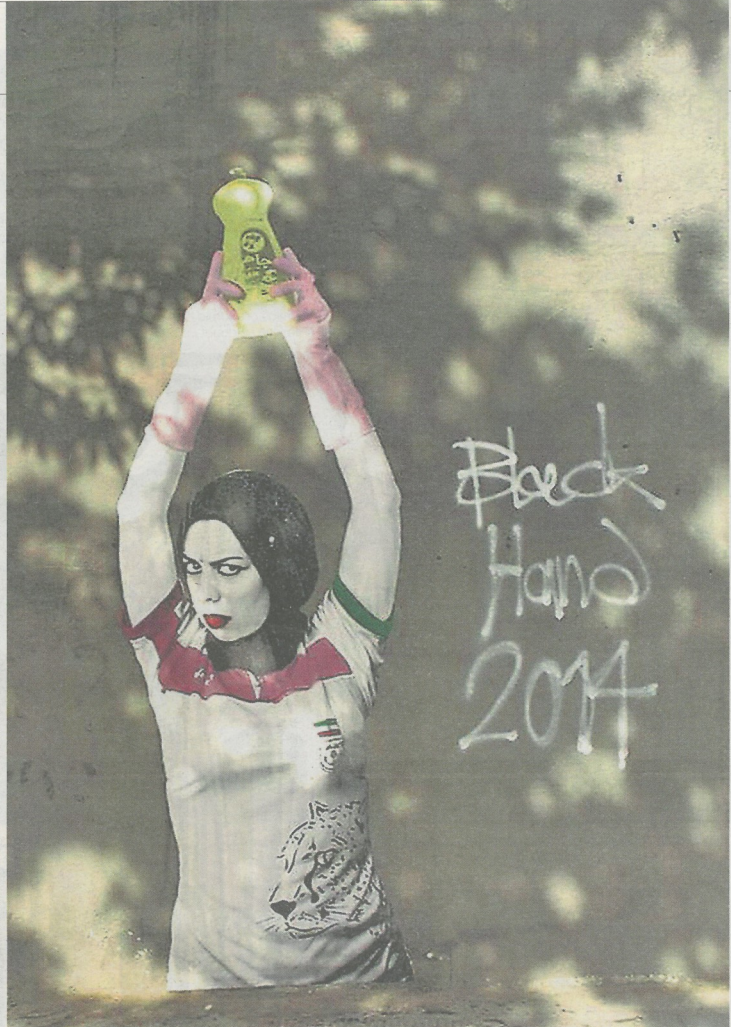
But President Ahmadinejad's more hardline regime in 2005 led to the start of international sanctions, and although artistic works were exempt, many auction houses have been unwilling to deal with Iranian artists.

Among those hoping to raise the profile of the artists whose careers have suffered is Lili Jassemi, co-founder of Sophia Contemporary Gallery, which opened in Mayfair earlier this year.

The gallery was founded, she says, to reach out to new collectors, adding that so far most of the Iranian artworks they have sold have been bought by collectors from outside the Middle East.

"And now the natural forces of a market will create a major boom in Iranian art, similar to the boom in the Chinese art market in the mid-2000s," says Ms Jassemi. "An emerging market with very fast-paced growth, with work still undervalued because it's been underestimated for a long time."

She points to three factors that have kept the Iranian art market healthy, despite the sanctions. Firstly, the Tehran Auction, running annually since



Clean up Street artist Black Hand's comment on women's exclusion from sport was painted over and later removed



Thorny subject The artwork by Azadeh Razaghdoust is inspired by European poets, such as Blake

2012, has stimulated the market domestically. Secondly, western auction houses have made efforts to raise interest; in 2008, Christie's sold Parviz Tanavoli's bronze sculpture *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)* for \$2.8 million (around £2 million), a record for a work by an Iranian artist. Sotheby's and Bonhams are now following suit and expanding their projects in the Middle East.

And thirdly, there is the unique quality of the art itself. "Iranian contemporary art is grounded in a very rich heritage, a thousand years of culture, tradition and craftsmanship," says Ms Jassemi.

"The art schools and the universities have high standards. They teach Persian miniature painting, calligraphy and book illustration," she continues. "When the artists come out of the school after five years they have this fusion of traditional artistic skills with contemporary style."

Most of Iran's top artists are women, says Mr Silfverstolpe, and among those likely to prove increasingly popular is Shirin Neshat, who made her name with her *Women of Allah* series of portraits of women overlaid by Persian calligraphy.



Wonder wall Parviz Tanavoli's £2 million bronze sculpture

"She was one of the artists who studied in the US in the 1970s and stayed there," says Mr Silfverstolpe. "She has a perception of her homeland and her people which reflects that of many of her compatriots, who have for various reasons left or fled and have faced a completely different country when they return."

Ms Jassemi thinks audiences will relate well to a younger generation of artists, including Pooya Aryanpour, whose abstract paintings and mirror installations draw on Sufi mysticism as well as western traditions, and Azadeh Razaghdoust, who is inspired by European poets such as Blake.

Street art is proving a magnet, too. The gently surreal murals of Mehdi Ghadyanloo - commissioned by the Iranian government to fill some of the many blank walls in the city, exhibited in London last year. The more openly satirical work of pseudonymous street artists are also popular, including "Black Hand" (known as the Banksy of Iran), who defies the laws against unauthorised graffiti.

The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art has reached a historic agreement with the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation to lend Germany its finest Iranian artwork, as well as some of its collection of western art. "At times of difficult diplomatic issues, we need the diplomacy of culture all the more urgently," as Frank-Walter Steinmeier, German Foreign Minister, noted on his visit to Tehran last year.