

THE REAL PRESENCE OF IRANIAN ART IN THE WESTERN CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD

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When someone brings up the topic of Iranian art, admittedly, a lot of people do not have any opinion on it. This is mostly due to the fact that little positive information is provided on Iran as a country, and most importantly, on Iran as a melting pot of contemporary art. Reasons for this are manifold, but let's just mention the biggest ones of all, the infamous Iranian Revolution and, of course, the recent, still ongoing conflicts between Iran and the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, as well as the one with ISIS. However, today, we are not here to talk about the troublesome political past of Iran, but about something wonderful and creative that emerged from one of the oldest civilizations in the world.

With its rich history that dates back to 3200-2800 BC, when the Proto-Elamite and Elamite kingdoms were formed, Iran is a country which produced many notable artists. The inception of modern Iranian art dates back to the late 1940s and early 1950s. This was the period after the death of Kamal al-Mulk, a painter whose passing marked the end of an inflexible devotion to academic painting. One may unfairly presume that Iranian art is not present in the western contemporary art world, which, of course, is not true. Today, we will see just how much of the amazing Iranian art are we able to see, touch, and experience, and how much the Iranian artists influence the contemporary art world of today.



The artist Reza Derakhshani at the opening of Sophia Contemporary Gallery in London. © Julija Svetlova via theartnewspaper.com

Iranian Artists Taking Over the Western World

Contrary to popular belief, Iranian art is not just about the **Hamsa** and the **Oriental** motifs and lurking in the underground galleries of the war-stricken country. Iranian artists very much keep up with the contemporary art scene and produce amazing artworks. Their Arabic roots make them able to translate the issues and social conventions of the region into their art, thus presenting the western societies with something “out of the box” of conventional themes and motifs that seem to constantly circulate in the art scene. Iranian artists are being more and more represented in the western art world, and one of the prime examples of this is the recent success of the Iranian-born artist **Reza Derakhshani**, who had exhibited his abstract paintings at **Sophia Contemporary Gallery**. The 18 paintings he exhibited nearly **sold-out** on the opening night and went into the hands of collectors from the UK, US and Germany, according to Vassili Tsarenkov, the Russian art dealer and the co-founder of the gallery. In addition to this, Derakhshani's works are a part of big art collections such as those of the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York, the **British Museum**, and the **Mirella Haggiag** collection in Rome.

Another artist worth mentioning is the famous **Shirin Neshat**, an Iranian visual artist who lives in New York City. She tackles the ideas of **femininity** and masculinity, public and private life, and antiquity and modernity. Her work has brought her the **International Award** of the **XLVIII Venice Biennale** in 1999, the **Silver Lion** for Best Director at the 66th Venice Film Festival in 2009, and many others. She has had solo exhibitions at the Castello DI Rivoli in Turin, Dallas Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, to name a few. She was the artist in residence at the Wexner Center for the Arts, and at MASS MoCA. Her works can be found at Gladstone Gallery in New York and Solomon R. The Guggenheim Museum, which only confirms the growing popularity of Iranian art in the Western contemporary art world. Another great example of the presence of Iranian artists is the filmmaker, screenwriter, and photographer, the **Tehran**-born **Abbas Kiarostami**. This versatile artist who has tackled the techniques of illustration and graphic design is one of the Iranians whose works can be found at Rossi & Rossi Gallery in **London**.



Projectile 10, by Shahpour Pouyan, part of Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran, an exhibition at Grey Art Gallery. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times via nytimes.com

The Growing Popularity of Iranian Art

When you hear that an artist's work has been displayed at the British Museum, the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Nelson Rockefeller Collection, that must mean that the artist is recognized and acclaimed worldwide, right? Absolutely right! The Iranian painter and [sculptor](#), Parviz Tanavoli is the said artist who has shown his art to the world. Due to the fact that the world is becoming less xenophobic and more interested in the works and ideas of someone who does not inherently "belong" to the Western world, the art scene has welcomed the Iranian artists with open hands and with the hunger for knowledge and their artistic representations of the burning issues occurring in the world of today. The ever-growing presence of the Iranian art in typically western museums, galleries, and biennials provide the clearest pieces of evidence of the growing popularity of Iranian art. Not only do these artists represent the so-called "diversity", a sought after phrase that proves the political correctness highly-promoted in the contemporary media, they also bring something more valuable to the table of the Western contemporary art scene - their masterful creations that do just what art is supposed to do, and that is to criticize the imposed social constructs, the notions of detachment from society (Albert Camus anyone?), existentialism, and the issues of gender, identity, cultural differences and the rich cultural heritage they bring from their home country.



Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli stands near a detail of his sculpture Poet Turning into Heech, at the Davis Museum on the campus of Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass. via [voanews.com](#)

More Galleries and Museums that Exhibit Iranian Art

Along with the aforementioned myriad of galleries, museums, and collections that display Iranian art, there are a few others worth mentioning. Mark Hachem Gallery, Galerie Perrotin, and Taymour Grahne Gallery in New York, Rose Issa Projects in London. An interesting recent event has consolidated Iranian art as one of the budding art scenes in the Western world. *Global/Local 1960-2015: Six Artists From Iran*, an exhibition that features six Iranian artists has been displayed at Grey Art Gallery in New York. Abby Weed Grey, the founding patron of the gallery has obtained a number of artworks by Iranian artists and donated it to the gallery, which means that the Grey has the largest collection of work by Parviz Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram's paintings in the world.



Abbas Kiarostami's Doors Without Keys at the Aga Khan Museum photo Craig Moy via [where.ca](#)

Contemporary Iranian Art and the Connections to its Roots and the West

Contemporary art in Iran has always been politically overwrought. However, Iranian art does not necessarily depict only **political turmoil** and **warmongering characters**. Many of the artists are not confined to the borders of their country, they are world travelers and culturally informed individuals who are able to produce art that presents something more than Iranian troublesome past. Many of them live and work in **Europe** and the **US**, their influences include Western painters, sculptors, and performance artists, and they present their works in galleries all over the world. Another interesting fact is, even though women in art are usually frowned upon in the **Islamic world**, a lot of female artists have emerged from Iran and they present their art equally as men do in the Western galleries. Apart from the famous Shirin Neshat, three Iranian women have exhibited their works at Edward Hopper House Art Center, in the exhibition titled *Where We Are Standing: Contemporary Women Artists From Iran*. The artists have presented their works influenced by the rich heritage of Iran and their current home, North America.



Shirin Neshat: Facing History at Hirshorn Museum in Washington D.C. via intheeleven.com

The Future of Iranian Art in the Western Art Scene

So, what can we expect in the future? If we take the recent events into consideration, the future of Iranian art in the Western art scene is bright. The artists from this country are proving to be well worth the attention of the frequenters of art galleries and museums, and their works are being sold for great amounts of money. The rising trend of exhibiting Iranian art is evident, and the contemporary art market is becoming richer and richer every day with the artworks of Persian artists. The combination of ancient culture, mysterious origins, and the overall prejudice about Iran make these artists interesting to the collectors and art lovers, as well as the young art aficionados who are always searching for something different than your run-of-the-mill Western world art. The Iranian art is surely becoming more available, and the chances are it will be even more present in the upcoming years. As the world is steadily becoming one big global village, we can definitely expect even more diversity and cultural colorfulness in the art scene, which will surely make our world a better world, a world with no prejudice, no stereotypes, and no xenophobia.

Editor's Tip: *Asia Society – Iran Modern*

If you want to read more about Iranian art, try with this beautifully illustrated volume that provides a new view of global interrelation not yet focused on in the accounts of art history. Ten essays by eminent scholars of art and history throw light on the early development of Iranian art and artists, galleries and patrons, architects, writers, and art schools who had major influence in the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These essays recount a time when Iran was a major player in the art world and may help one understand the position of Iran in the western art scene today.

Featured image: View of The Book of Kings by Shirin Neshat via bmoreart.com

