

Introduction

Through the mist of time, I think back to the semi-dark interiors and spotlighted walls of Tehran’s art galleries. I go back five years, ten years, fifteen years, and I stop around that period. I try to remember the names of the galleries. Gallery Borghese, Gallery Saba, Gallery Iran, Farhang Hall, and the Abyaz Palace, where four of Tehran’s five biennial art exhibitions were held. Good old names and good old days!¹

Inspired by art critic Karim Emami’s 1977 article “Saqqakhaneh Revisited,” which was highly influential in shaping Iran’s art history, this study seeks to revisit modernist Iranian art production to explore a more political and contextualized interpretation of modernism in Iran. A theoretical framework rooted in postcolonial critique and interwoven with iconographic analysis will help dismantle imperial notions of modernity and has the potential to decolonize modernist Iranian art history. This approach will allow us to see that Iranian modernist art was not simply a local implementation of universal modernist practices but a highly diverse field of cultural production that negotiated and reflected upon questions of modernity and modernization as practiced in Iran. Modernist artistic expression was closely tied to both a critique of the adaptation of Western modernity, articulated using the term “westoxification” (*gharbzadegi*), and the country’s political struggles for liberalization and democracy.

In recent decades, art historians have established an accepted canon and trajectory for modernist Iranian art. Modeled after stylistic categorization and terminology of European art history, this canon has established a hierarchical order of modernist art and narrates a story of modernism’s evolution in Iran based on the idea of linear artistic progress. However, a methodology dominated by biographical study and formalism largely detaches Iranian modernist production from its

¹ Karim Emami, ‘Saqqakhaneh School Revisited’, *Saqqakhaneh Exh.-Cat* (Tehran: Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977).

sociopolitical and sociocultural context of origin and places this art in a political vacuum. In this context, formalist art criticism and its focus on stylistic development became a decisive means of categorizing Iranian art as modern and secular and, thus, interacting with modernist art from Iran in the broader discourse of global modernity. This is reflected in the established canon of modernist art in Iran, which takes as its underlying and organizing principle the idea of artistic progress in the form of a common narrative about the evolution of modernism in Iran. It is, however, important to note the canon of modernist Iranian art does not simply represent a hierarchical order of formal and aesthetic qualities. Instead, as Elizabeth C. Mansfield points out, “the canon serves as a means to demark cultural and social boundaries.” As a “realization of a culture’s self-conception,” the art-historical canon “allows a society to visualize itself” and “gives material form to a society’s fantasy of collective identity.”²

How have these boundaries become so widely accepted? What does it mean to write the history of modernist art in Iran? Whom and what interests does the depoliticized history of formalist progress serve? What are the contexts and purposes of a continuing formalist Iranian art historiography today? What is the artists’ agency in this discourse? What ideological significance did and do modernist artworks still possess?

Art historians typically identify the foundation of the Art Academy at Tehran University in 1941 as the beginning of modernist art in Iran. This is seen as the first indication of modernist artistic production because the foundation of universities happened in the broader discourse of Iran’s modernization programs and was an essential strategy for implementing Western modernity in Iran. This modernization becomes evident in the case of the art academy, which replaced earlier systems of artistic training with Western models of education. The director of Tehran’s art academy, the French architect and archeologist André Godard, developed the curriculum for artist education in Iran based on the teaching methods of the French *École-des-Beaux-Arts* system. Thus, students became familiar with Western art not only at the academy but also during their state-sponsored stays in European

² Elisabeth Mansfield, ‘Border Patrols. Art History as Identity,’ in E. C. Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2007), 14.

capitals, where they had the opportunity to deepen their studies and expand their knowledge about European contemporary artistic trends. After their return to Iran, the first generation of modernist artists experimented with techniques of Western modernism and adopted European artistic styles, such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and abstract art.

Various art-historical accounts classify the period of the 1940s and 1950s as a time of asynchronous and often belated attempts to translate European artistic discourses into the Iranian context. For art history, however, this era of formalist imitation and experiments with Western modernity created the necessary technical foundations, which paved the way for the evolution of a local modernism. The resulting emergence of a specific Iranian modernism in the 1960s and 1970s, which is often seen as a skillful symbiosis of Iranian visual traditions and Western means of modernist expression, has often been interpreted as the pinnacle of Iran's modernist art history. In these historiographical accounts, merging Iran's visual traditions with the expression of modern Western forms signals the country's successful modernization while preserving a specific national identity. After a short period during which modernism flourished, however, the linear art-historical narrative of Iran's adaptation and appropriation of modernity comes to a sudden end with the rise of political Islam and the growing dissemination of revolutionary ideology, eventually leading to the Iranian Revolution in 1978/79.

The predominantly formalist methodological approach of Iranian art historiography, which often focuses on the aesthetic adaptation of modern European modes of expression, produces an art history based on stylistic divisions. This idea of Iranian modernism as a sign of the successful visual implementation of Western modernity played into the hands of official cultural politics. Under the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979), cultural politics and the promotion of art and culture played a crucial role in communicating Iran's successful modernization and secularization both domestically and abroad. In particular, modernist art became an important signifier for the efficiency of the state's modernization programs. For their nationalist and westernizing ideology, Pahlavi cultural programs often used Iranian modernism as part of a power-political strategy to prove Iran was on its way to becoming a westernized nation-state. This became even more important after the events of Iran's oil nationalization leading to the

coup d'état in 1953, which shattered the country's unstable political structures of secular democracy. Backed by British and US secret services, the coup overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq. After the coup and the reinstatement of Mohammad Reza Shah's royal dictatorship, the government established national surveillance systems to prevent a further "politicisation of the society," as Ali Ansari explains.³ After the political events of 1953, the monarchy became the most important patron for the promotion and exhibition of modernist art in Iran and institutionalized all fields of cultural production. In this regard, the institutionalization of critical voices against the monarchy became a power-political strategy for defusing any kind of oppositional criticism.

This instrumentalization of Iranian modernist art helped to strengthen the ideological bond with Iran's Western allies during the Cold War. During this period, Cold War capitalist ideology promoted abstract art as a symbol of an allegedly universal culture. Peter Weibel explains, "The concept of a neutral universal culture, which the ruling cadres of the respective countries all tended to deploy, functioned as the pillar of the global system." Based on the ideas of modernization and progress, "universal culture, a knowledge of the same languages, literary and visual works all became the fraternal signs by which the capital accumulators of the world recognized one another."⁴ In this context, modern and, in particular, abstract art played a crucial role in presenting this idea of universality. Modern abstract art was often seen as a symbol of freedom of expression and as a means of fighting totalitarianism. Thus, modern art helped propagate abstraction's superiority over socialist realism in the field of art and Western capitalist superiority over Soviet Socialism in the political realm. In this way, abstraction was turned into an ideological weapon to construct a common Western identity that traversed countries and national borders and to communicate allegedly universal ideals of freedom and liberalism.⁵ In this context, Iran's appreciation of modernist art

³ Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After: Reform and Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 162.

⁴ Peter Weibel, 'Globalization: The End of Modern Art?' *ZKM Magazine*, 2013. <https://zkm.de/en/magazine/2013/02/globalization-the-end-of-modern-art>

⁵ See Frances Saunders Stonor, *Who Paid the Piper? CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), 1–7; Eva Cockcroft, 'Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War,' *Artforum*, vol. 15 (1974), 39–41; Serge Guilbaut,

served as confirmation that it had the symbolic capital of “taste” necessary to recognize the universal language of Western modernism. Pierre Bourdieu explains that “material or symbolic consumption of works of art constitutes one of the supreme manifestations of ease, in a sense both of objective leisure and subjective facility.”⁶ In the case of Iran, Bourdieu’s sociological analysis illustrates that culture not only functions in the realm of class distinction within a national society but can also be applied as political currency on a higher level to emulate Western nation-states and to move up in the global world order. Looking at modernist art, visiting museum exhibitions, and the general appreciation of modernism by the royal family in Iran thus helped to demonstrate that the monarchy and its royal members had “a relation of immediate familiarity with things of taste.”⁷ This image was also deployed globally in foreign policy as a vital sign of the Pahlavi monarchy’s modernity and its “unconscious unity of class” with Western nation-states.⁸

The institutionalization and instrumentalization of modernist art by the Pahlavi state established a powerful historiographical paradigm, which places modernist artistic expression from Iran in the service of the monarchy. In particular, both recent exhibition projects outside Iran and the exhibition activities of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) repeat this paradigm. In these contexts, modernist Iranian art plays a key role as a visual manifestation in memorializing prerevolutionary Iran as a westernized and secularized country. During this time, the Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture in Iran also supported the publication of art-historical overviews about the evolution of Iranian modernist art. In these books, contemporary art critics and art historians shared their first-hand findings and decisively shaped the field of formalist modern art history in Iran. This generation of writers tried to establish a different narrative, which reached further back and paid more attention to the intellectual underpinnings of cultural exchange, which has been forgotten in more recent approaches. One example of these formalist stylistic overviews is *L’art moderne en Iran* (1967) by the painter and critic Akbar

How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77. ⁸ *Ibid.*

Tajvidi, who locates the beginning of modernist art in Iran around 1890 when Iranian artists became familiar with Western arts during their travels to Europe. According to Tajvidi, from this point on, artistic experiences in the “contact zones” altered Iranian artistic production tremendously and introduced Western artistic means into the Iranian context.⁹ According to Tajvidi, a short period of imitation allowed Iranian artists to catch up with developments in painting in European art history. After that, Iranian artists began merging Persian visual traditions, such as calligraphy and ornamentation, with modern Western art, achieving in this manner, according to the author, an unprecedented manifestation of artistic innovation and creativity in Iran.¹⁰

In 1974, art historian Ruyin Pakbaz provides a more critical approach to the adaptation of Western modernism in Iran. He points out that the integration of Western artistic means dates back to Safavid times and significantly influenced Qajar painting. Despite earlier adaptations of Western aesthetics, Pakbaz considers only Iranian art after World War II modern because it marks a radical break with earlier artistic traditions, symbolizing “a battle of ideas . . . between the old generation and the new.”¹¹ Throughout his book, Pakbaz follows the idea of a formalist evolution and categorization of Iranian art while also emphasizing the significance of nationalizing tendencies in visual art. For him, the artistic turn to Iran’s traditions was intended to create a specific version of Iranian modernism,

The richest feature in the style and character of contemporary art in Iran over the last few decades is the artist [*sic*] search for a definite identity, their effort to create a genuine Iranian school of contemporary art with a distinctive national character. These artists took advantage of novel technical possibilities of expression in Western art to evolve an original Iranian personal style.¹²

It is interesting to note that Pakbaz characterizes the incorporation of Iranian elements as “personal,” which implies the ideas of subjectivity

⁹ See Marie Louise Pratt, ‘Arts of the Contact Zone,’ *Profession* (1991), 33–40.

¹⁰ Akbar Tadjvidi, *L’art moderne en Iran* (Tehran: Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture, 1967). 5.

¹¹ Ruyin Pakbaz, *Contemporary Iranian Painting and Sculpture* (Tehran: Ministry of Fine Arts and Culture, 1974), 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

and genius. “Subjecting influences from abroad” in combination with “painstaking critical analysis” of the universal European modern represent, for Pakbaz, a way to make the “latent national genius and creativeness” visible.¹³ Despite his initial openness toward modernism, Pakbaz remains critical of the practice of modernist expression in Iran. For him, Iranian modernist art “lacks historical continuity” and could not fulfill its “declared objective of founding an ‘Iranian’ style.”¹⁴ This is because “only a handful of contemporary Iranian artists have really understood their culture.”¹⁵ For Pakbaz, the majority of Iranian artists produced only formalist artworks while ignoring the sociocultural and sociopolitical discourses of their time. In his numerous writings over the years, Pakbaz further elaborated his critical assessment of the practice of modernism in Iran, which was influenced by a Marxist approach and has shaped the field of modernist art historiography in Iran.¹⁶ In particular, a younger generation of artists and art historians have critically questioned the adaptation and implementation of Western modernity in Iran, the monarchy’s ideological instrumentalization of modernist art, and the artists’ agency during this time. For many critics, such as the artist and writer Iman Afsarian, the discursive constitution of Western modernity and its claim to universalism were by no means applicable to the Iranian context. For Afsarian, Iranian artists tried to catch up with Western modernity in the art field due to a general inferiority complex surrounding the West. This catching-up, however, only took place on a visual and formalist level, without a “historical awareness” of the history of Western modernity or the Iranian sociopolitical context.¹⁷

As will be shown in this book, opinions on modernist Iranian art vary greatly. For art historians, Hamid Keshmirshakan and Fereshteh Daftari, who have contributed tremendously to global scholarship on modernist Iranian modernism, the incorporation of traditional elements from Iran’s visual heritage represents a principal expression of

¹³ Ibid. ¹⁴ Ibid., 39. ¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ See Ruyin Pakbaz, ‘Dar jostiju-ye hoviyat’ [Seeking Identity], *Herfeh: Honarmand* (Tehran, 2007), 18; Ruyin Pakbaz, *Encyclopedia of Art* (Tehran, 1999); Ruyin Pakbaz, *Naqashi-ye Iran. Az diruz ta emruz [Iranian Painting. From Yesterday to Today]* (Tehran: B Nashr-e Naristan, 2000).

¹⁷ Iman Afsarian, ‘Chera ma nemitavanim honar-e moaser dashte bashim?’ [Why Can’t We Have Contemporary Art]. *Herfeh: Honarmand* (Autumn 2015), 101–103.

identity politics. In these accounts, merging modernist expression with local Iranian traditions represents an artistic strategy for exploring a possible modern Iranian identity in the broader discourse of global modernity based on cultural difference.¹⁸ However, this conceptualization of modernist art in terms of hybridity is also based on the dominance of formalism. It operates with the idea of merging universal elements of Western modernity with local traditional expression. Consequently, Iranian creativity and artistic innovation originate within Western modernity's framework, which in turn reaffirms Western hierarchies.

A closer look at various contributions to Iranian art historiography reveals that these accounts operate with varying concepts of modernity and modernist art production. In this regard, two major views on the adaptation and appropriation of modernity in the Iranian context can be extracted from the existing historiography. The first concept is based on the idea that Iranian artists fully adapted modernist expression by means of assimilation and mimicry. The second model suggests that the search for an Iranian version of modernism was achieved on an aesthetic level through cultural mixing. Yet, as different as the positions may be, whether they support or oppose the government of Mohammad Reza Shah and whether they promote the idea of Western modernity's completion or its failure in Iran, it is a politically motivated formalist understanding of modernist art from Iran that prevails. The dominant perception of artistic production from this period is that it was secular, westernized, and modernist. According to art historian Shiva Balaghi, a formalist methodology leads, in this regard, to the concealment of the artists' political engagement and their struggle for liberalization. Balaghi explains,

Iranian artists in the 1960s and 1970s were engaged in the search for a solution to “the problem of culture” under capitalism. In the cultural lexicon

¹⁸ See, for example, Fereshteh Daftari, *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2019); Hamid Keshmirshakan (ed.), *Amidst Shadow and Light: Contemporary Iranian Art and Artists* (Hong Kong: Liaoning Creative Press, 2005); Hamid Keshmirshakan, *Contemporary Iranian Art: New Perspectives* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).

of Iran, the “West” did not simply represent a higher civilizational model to be emulated, but an imposing presence on its national autonomy.¹⁹

This points to a third model of modernity in Iranian visual art, in which the merging of Western elements with Iranian visual traditions was not a formal but an analytical artistic strategy. Due to formalism’s dominance, the analytical and critical deployment of a simultaneously intellectual and aesthetic language has been widely neglected in Iranian art historiography. This study tries to alter the general perception of modernist Iranian art as mere visual experiments with Western means of expression and to situate it within the social and political context of its origin by means of a contextual approach to art history and a critique of formalism.

In the years after World War II, the formalist approach flourished as the leading methodology in the reception and analysis of modernist arts. Art critics such as Clement Greenberg contributed significantly to formalism’s success in establishing itself as the dominant method in modern art history. Focusing solely on formal-aesthetic qualities of modernist artworks, formalist criticism conceals the interdependent correlation between art and its social and historical frameworks. For Greenberg, art’s sociopolitical contexts compromise the ideals of modernisms’ aesthetic autonomy and pureness. Due to the continued dominance of formalism, nonformalist approaches began sprouting up in the 1950s, and a countermovement started in reaction to the formalist agenda. The proponents of nonformalist art history followed a more contextual and synthetic approach by taking the historical circumstances of artistic productions into account. The debate about formalism and politics in art history reached new heights in the 1990s when advocates of nonformalism criticized formalist art history as a means of depoliticizing artistic practice and neutralizing art’s critical implications.²⁰ For instance, the art historian Deniz Tekiner argued that the formalist methodology and its concealment of art’s social

¹⁹ Shiva Balaghi, ‘Iranian Visual Arts in “The Century of Machinery, Speed, And the Atom”: Rethinking Modernity,’ in Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (eds.), *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 24.

²⁰ For a further discussion and summary of the debates about formalism in art history, see Deniz Tekiner, ‘Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning,’ *Social Justice*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2006), 31–44; Johanna Drucker, ‘Formalism’s Other History,’ *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 78, no. 4 (1996), 750–751.

implications serve capitalist market interests. For Tekiner, the focus on art's aesthetic qualities confirms "the prevailing system of art commodity exchange and its ideology" and transforms artworks into "objects in commodity relations."²¹

In the case of Iranian modernist art, the close ties between formalist criticism and the state's instrumentalization of modernist art led to its interpretation in a political vacuum. The idea of art as a symbol of Iran's successful modernization has shaped the reception of this artistic production to this day. This, in turn, shows that modernist Iranian art has evolved out of a complex discursive construction of Iranian modernity and points, in fact, to art and politics' close relationship with and interdependence on one another. Chantal Mouffe writes,

There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. From the point of view of the theory of hegemony, artistic practices play a role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order, or in its challenging, and this is why they necessarily have a political dimension.²²

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière holds a similar view of the relationship between art and politics. Rancière writes, "art is not, in the first instance, political because of the messages and sentiments it conveys concerning the state of the world" but rather because "the specificity of art consists in bringing about a reframing of material and symbolic space."²³ With this in mind, the depoliticization of modernist art and its interpretation as aesthetic evidence of art's autonomy indicate a questionable concept of modernity. The underlying idea of modernity "tries to retain the forms of rupture, the iconoclastic gestures, etc., by separating them from the context that allows for their existence: history, interpretation, patrimony, the museum, the pervasiveness of reproduction."²⁴ Rancière strongly criticizes the modernist narrative and its obsession with the "new" and art's alleged radical break with representational styles. He even states that these notions of modernity "have been deliberately invented to prevent a clear

²¹ Tekiner, 'Formalist Art Criticism and the Politics of Meaning,' 40.

²² Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 91.

²³ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 23.

²⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 21.