



THE QUEEN OF CULTURE

HER MAJESTY FARAH PAHLAVI

In her 20-year tenure as Empress of Iran, Her Majesty Farah Pahlavi was patron to 12 artistic institutions and presided over 26 educational, health, sports and cultural organisations, among them non-governmental entities. In an exclusive interview with *Canvas*, she reveals unchanged and enduring passions: art, culture, her compatriots and her beloved Iran.



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ess than 10 minutes into my interview with Her Majesty Farah Pahlavi, she has already mentioned serving the people of Iran twice. First, to explain her reasons behind pursuing architecture at the École Spéciale d'Architecture in Paris in 1957 – “It meant building for the people. Not just in terms of houses, but for a society.” And second, when I ask what inspired her cultural contribution to Iran – “My country is so culturally rich, I wanted to protect what we have historically for the people. We can’t only live in the past and I wanted to support the young Contemporary artists for future generations.” And so she did, primarily by encouraging private businesses, individuals and government entities to build collections and publish books. “In every way we could,” she says. “The Ministry of Culture didn’t have the resources, due to their numerous responsibilities, and in Iran, those who had the means helped in building hospitals and orphanages,

which was wonderful. Slowly, they began to acquire art and orient towards culture.”

Calling for Culture

Fifty years since she married the late Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the seeds that Her Majesty sowed into the Iranian Contemporary art field continue to bear fruit. Big names she had patronised, such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (*Canvas 5.5*), Bahman Mohasses, Faramarz Pilaram, Iran Daroudi, Parviz Tanavoli (*Canvas 4.2*) and Nasser Ovissi – a work by the latter being “my first purchase” – are now among the hottest

Opening page: Iran, October 1967. Her Majesty Empress Farah Pahlavi wearing her Van Cleef & Arpels-designed crown at the 1967 coronation ceremony. Photo by Carlo Bavagnoli/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Above: Farhad Ahrarnia. *Farah Flirtation With Surrender*. 2008. Photograph on cotton aida and embroidery. 108 x 120 cm. Courtesy Rose Issa Projects.

Facing page: Bahman Mohasses. *Acrobate*. 1977. Bronze. 16 x 21 x 72 cm.

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and most sought-after names in the rapidly emerging Iranian art scene. “I always hoped that our artists would become world-renowned, especially as we were sending their work abroad for exhibitions, but to think of what has been happening at the Dubai [Christie’s] sales is great!”

Following the economic boom that Iran experienced in 1974, by which time crude oil production had more than quadrupled, Her Majesty saw an opportunity to pursue the artistic vision she had for her country. “I asked my husband and the government to fulfil our cultural ambitions,” she recalls. Intent on furthering the Iranian people’s cultural education and on exposing Iran’s artistic treasures to the wider world, she also set out to retrieve some of the nation’s prized artefacts that had previously found homes in the West. As part of this process of ‘buying back’ such emblems of Iran’s cultural history, she established several museums. Among these were the Carpet Museum – “Iran was known for its carpets and we didn’t have a museum in which to house them” – The Negarestan Museum of Qajar Dynasty Arts, the Abguineh Museum of pre- and post-Islamic glassware and ceramics and the Reza Abbasi Museum of pre- and post-Islamic pieces, which sent some of its works on loan to the British Museum’s 2009 exhibition, *Shah ‘Abbas: The Remaking of Iran* (Canvas 5.3).

The Royal Tenure

Ironically, en route to Her Majesty’s Paris residence, it was a bus bearing the logo of SAVAC – a French tourism and transport agency – which gave me a little mental jolt as it whizzed by. SAVAC triggered the recollection of SAVAK, Iran’s [former] notorious security and intelligence service which, according to

opponents of the Shah’s regime, abused its mandate and in some cases, resorted to enhanced interrogation techniques. One by one, mental snapshots of Her Majesty flicked open, the way a photo album trails someone’s life – the pretty 21 year-old beaming at her 1959 wedding and looking radiant in a Christian Dior gown designed by Yves Saint Laurent; a symbol of grace and female empowerment at her coronation in 1967, caped in a Dior cloak designed by Marc Bohan with Iranian motifs embroidered by Poursan Daroudi, and of course, the unforgettable Van Cleef & Arpels crown, designed and set by Pierre Arpels in Tehran; smiling and waving from her motorcade during her visits to various Iranian cities and towns while the overjoyed masses flocked to give her letters, kiss or embrace her; listening attentively to performance artists during her patronage of the Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–77), a gathering of the world’s Avant-garde performing artists; boarding the flight that would take the Pahlavis into exile forever; and finally, at the Cairo state funeral of her beloved husband in 1980. But Her Majesty has remained much like the *Shahbanu* (Queen in Farsi) that she was. After all, it is not the crown that makes the queen. But rather, the queen that makes the crown.

Politics and the passage of history aside, this is a woman with an inescapable passion for art. And, three decades after leaving Iran, she continues to inspire, particularly among a generation of Contemporary Iranian artists, such as Ramin Haerizadeh (Canvas 5.6), Ghass Rouzkhosh (Canvas 4.1), Farhad Ahrarnia and Mehdi Farhadian, whose large surreal canvases play on parallel eras of then and now. “I saw that painting!” exclaims Her Majesty of Farhadian’s portrait of five women (including herself) in hot pink mini beach dresses.



“It was a private photo taken at the Caspian Sea and it’s so strange to see a painting of it!” She blushes and I then understand that she did not do so because the painting was drawn from a ‘private’ photograph, but rather from a sense of feeling humbled. “Maybe they [Contemporary Iranian artists] know how much I was involved in culture and artists. It touches me very much when I hear about young people born after the Revolution who have sympathy and affection towards us. It tells me that the seeds one plants with love and care never die. I am a part of Iran’s history, after all.”

Poetic Passions

In her living room, some images that one may find through Google, or her memoir, *An Enduring Love: My Life with the Shah*, are framed. A replica of her coronation crown rests underneath a marble bust of the Shah, almost like a visual parable of the king that crowned his queen, as though in these two items, their history is recounted. It takes a moment or two to absorb her enlightening ‘lived-in’ surroundings. “I

had a César sculpture in the shape of a thumb in my library at Niavaran Palace in Tehran,” she jokes, “and one day, my husband came and said to me ‘Listen, you are receiving people in here and this is not appropriate!’ so I put it outside.” She then bursts into fits of giggles. “In its place, I put a roughly three-metre bronze *Heech* by Tanavoli.” Bookcases are stacked with Persian, French and English tomes on Persian history, heritage, gardens, palaces, arts and crafts, carpets, cities and a significant number of volumes on the great Persian poets Hafez, Khayyám and Rumi – “I know we have issues with the Turks because they believe Rumi was Turkish,” she laughs. “Our poets have said everything,” she says, “it’s as if they have known the world, as if they have lived today.” Poetry is indeed incredibly central to Iranian culture and has long remained a literary rite of passage. Social get-togethers often include the recitation of verses by Hafez, among others, and during Her Majesty’s patronage of the Shiraz Arts Festival, governors would organise garden dinners that included poetry readings

HM Farah Pahlavi with a portrait by Claudio Bravo. *Portrait Farah Pahlavi*. 2003. Gouache on canvas. 80 x 129 cm.

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from many of Iran's prized poets. "Imagine, sometimes I would get requests for the building of an orphanage or the asphaltting of a road composed as a poem!" she recalls. Later, driven by their anti-Western dogmas, revolutionary forces sought to destroy anything symbolic of Iran's modernisation under the Shah's rule. They even went as far as attempting to demolish a statue of the illustrious 10th-century Iranian poet, Ferdowsi. "But they couldn't destroy our poet. Our poets are stronger than what these people [the revolutionaries] say," she answers adamantly.

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) remains a focal point of inspiration among Iran's Contemporary artists, but some of its greatest surviving illuminated manuscripts – the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb – have also been a point of contention since the 1970s. This was when Iran was approached by Arthur Houghton II (later President of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art) to buy back the entire *Shahnameh* for \$20 million. When the Pahlavis refused the astronomical price – "we couldn't pay this sum in those days" – Houghton donated some pages to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Various pages later appeared at Christie's and Sotheby's auctions; Houghton had taken the manuscript apart in the hope of selling the pages individually and the remaining ones were estimated at \$6 million. In 1994, Iranian officials swapped *Woman III*, an abstract nude work by Willem de Kooning – part of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art's (TMCA) collection that was acquired by Her Majesty during her reign, but considered lewd by Iran's existing regime – with pages from the 16th-century *Shahnameh*. In 2006, *Woman III* was sold to hedge fund billionaire Stephen Cohen for a staggering \$137.5 million. "So, one day, after hearing about this, I called the TMCA pretending to be a student who wanted to see the permanent [Western] collection," says Her Majesty, "and I told them 'You can't do this, it's the artistic capital of our culture, it's material capital!' and the man said, 'Madam, they are forcing

Previous page: Charles Hossein Zenderoudi. *Vous Devriez Jouer Le 32*. 1978. Metallic pigments and acrylic on paper. 33 x 25 cm. Courtesy of Charles Hossein Zenderoudi.

Facing page: Farhad Ahrarnia. *Bavar*. 2008. Digital photography on cotton aida, embroidery and needles. 58 x 20 cm. Courtesy of Rose Issa Projects.

us.' I only hope that that was the sole exchange."

The collection that Her Majesty acquired for the TMCA is reportedly worth \$3 billion today and numbers about 400 artworks. Among the museum's advisory board were curator Donna Stein, professor of American literature David Galloway, Tanavoli, gallerist Tony Shafrazi and architect Kamran Diba, Her Majesty's cousin, who designed the museum between 1968–9 and who was also its chief curator and involved in its acquisitions, all of which were approved by Her Majesty. Her face lights up when the TMCA is mentioned. The museum's inception arose from conversations she had with Iranian artists, who suggested a Contemporary museum. "Why couldn't Iran have a museum for [Contemporary] Iranian art?" she asks, "I thought we should, and include it with Western art. We couldn't afford to go back to art from centuries before, so we focused more on the Contemporary." Going as far back as the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists – Monet, Pissarro, Degas, Renoir and van Gogh – the TMCA also acquired works by Magritte, Dalí, Duchamp, Miró, Ernst (*L'Histoire Naturelle*), Kandinsky, Rothko, Pollock (*Mural on a Red Indian Ground*), Picasso (*The Painter and His Model*), Bacon (*Figures Lying on a Bed With Attendants*), Giacometti, Munch, Indiana, Lichtenstein and Warhol (*Mick Jagger, Marilyn Monroe and Mao Zedong*), among many others. "They chose the best," she says of the collection. And what of the ever-eccentric Warhol and his trip to Tehran? "I was so happy and proud that he did this [the portraits of Her Majesty (page 144), the Shah and the Shah's sister, Princess Ashraf] out of his own will," she says, almost stifling giggles, "he was a little bit strange, I must say! But it's the way some artists are, I suppose. He was very kind to me and we established a good rapport."

Enduring Remnants

Perhaps what is not widely known was Her Majesty's intention to build a Modern art museum in Shiraz, a maquette of which was drawn up by Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, whose international fame was propelled by his design of the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. "We also wanted each Iranian city to bear its own art through a constructed museum," adds

Her Majesty, going on to mention the Khorramabad Museum in the western Iranian province of Lorestan, renowned for its ancient bronzes. With the advent of the Revolution, many of Her Majesty's cultural projects were left unfinished, among them renovation plans for Isfahan's bazaars, the restoration of ancient monuments and the documentation of Iran's tile and brickwork heritage, which she had commissioned the historian Yahya Zoka to complete. "Zoka passed away and as per his wishes, his son sent the finished book to me in the USA," she says. Still, Her Majesty is content that all was not lost. "There were people there who safeguarded the collections," she says, "and I'm glad that in 2005, Ali Reza Sami Azar [then director of the TMCA] exhibited some of the work, [*Modern Art Movement*] and published a catalogue. Everyone saw what we have." Her Majesty recalls how a French broadcasting network once aired a programme on the Revolution which included the TMCA and some of its Western paintings. She caught sight of her Warhol portrait, slashed in the centre. "What kind of people they are!" she exclaims, "But maybe that happened in the very beginning."

Over the years, galleries have approached her to authenticate artworks presented by vendors claiming the works used to be part of the Pahlavi collection. "I still keep hope that things will not remain this way," she trails off in a whisper, "but it's such a pity for a country like Iran that prides itself on its old civilisation and rich culture. The Iranian people deserve a better regime." Some have even tried to sell Her Majesty a portrait of herself at the coronation. "I told the messengers that I don't have a wall to put it on and I don't buy stolen objects." The latest uprising in Iran following the June 2009 presidential elections has stirred one too many emotions for Her Majesty. "The world saw that the Iranian people seek change, freedom, human rights and democracy against this terrible oppression that they endure. I admire the courage and will of the Iranian people, especially those of women and the youth and even some religious figures. The people of Iran will continue to fight for their basic rights."

In 1978, pioneering Swiss aerial photographer Georg Gerster visited Tehran and was commissioned by Her Majesty to take shots of Iran, which she intended on exhibiting and





publishing in a book. Gerster took the photographs but then the Revolution swept the country, leaving the images unseen. In 2005, Her Majesty visited the Bochum Museum in Germany with her friend Maryam Sachs and accidentally came across the photos, part of an exhibition celebrating Persian history. "I couldn't believe it!" she exclaims; "Fortunately, Maryam was so courageous and, with her perseverance, she found a publisher." The images were exhibited in April 2009 at the New York-based Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, where Gerster signed copies of *Paradise Lost: Persia From Above*. The gallery is also where Her Majesty keeps up-to-date with Contemporary Iranian artists while in New York, and she is a regular visitor to Galerie Thaddeus Ropac in Paris. "It's fantastic and so

encouraging [to see] because in spite of all the pressure, these artists have managed to maintain their creativity in all realms. I am so happy and proud of my compatriots." She sips at her coffee and unwraps a caramel sweet. What would Her Majesty like to do for these Iranian artists? "I don't think they need me anymore," she muses, "there are great collectors and galleries who support them, but I will always visit their shows and help introduce them to galleries." She twiddles her gold ring – a *Heech* by Tanavoli. The word *heech* means 'nothingness', so I ask what its significance is to her. She murmurs something in Farsi; "*Heech* means nothing... *heech...heech...heech...* so don't let anything destroy you. Do not be absorbed by negative things," she smiles, "and go to Iran because it's such a beautiful country with hospitable people." 🇮🇷

Facing page: Nasser Assar. Untitled. 1976. Watercolour on paper. 103 x 74 cm.

Above: HM Farah Pahlavi with a work by Nasser Ovissi. *Seated Horse*. 2008. Watercolour-calligraphy in 22 carat gold. 62 x 42 cm.

For more information visit www.farahpahlavi.org