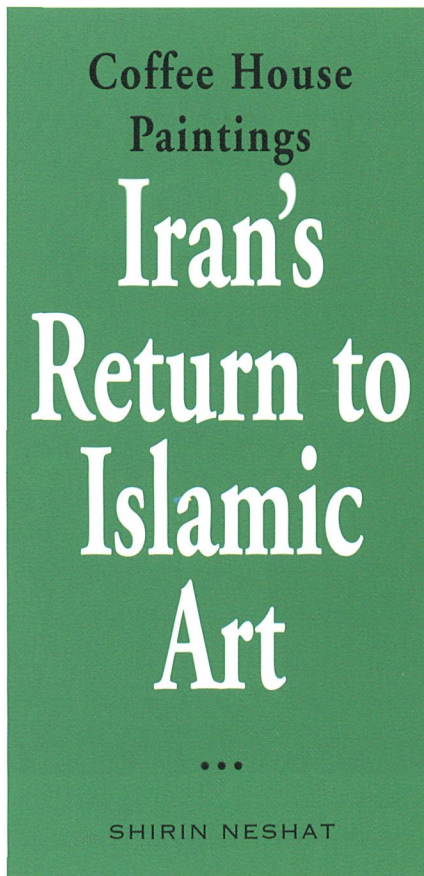


REVIEWS

Since the Islamic revolution, contemporary Iranians are finding it a challenge to re-identify themselves. Traditional Persian iconography no longer seems to represent the Iranian culture, and has been long substituted by new icons such as guns and veils. Once the fantasy land of the Orient, this country has been transformed into the Middle East's ideological battle ground. The new Iran has made it its mission to 'purify' its culture by uprooting all foreign influences. To most Westerners, this shift from the exotics of 'Persia' to the militancy of 'Islamic fundamentalism' is incomprehensible and difficult. However, the return to Islam for many Iranians has followed a long history of colonialism and Western domination over the last century, and a consequent necessity to reclaim a lost identity. At the time of the revolution, Islam offered the only alternative toward a collective, philosophical and spiritual directive. Mansoor Ehsan, author of *Politics of Martyrdom in Post Revolutionary Iran* describes: "The construction of Islamic fundamentalism is usually plotted (by the West) on a graph that separates tradition from modernity. The Islamic culture is homogenized and placed in the category of tradition, while modernity marks the Western culture. Modernity is associated with science, technology, progress, rationality, and democracy.



These attributes all carry a positive signature, while tradition fills the negative slot with its archaic, irrational, reactionary, superstitious, and despotic attributes."

The intention of this article, however, is not to analyze or defend the political configuration of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but to study the present Iranian culture and how it embodies the social and political Islamization that has taken place since the revolution. Perhaps a close look at this 'cultural purification' movement, may facilitate an understanding of why and how Iranians have arrived at such a state of self-determination.

Islamic revolution has made cultural production a serious business, a system to disseminate its ideology. Culture is no longer about 'fun' or giving 'pleasure', but it functions as a tool for communication. Art and thought, intellectualism and sensuality, logic and poetry seem to be running parallel. In recent years, art has become less and less 'precious', and more accessible. This is remarkable considering this country's long history of making arts and crafts to entertain kings and queens. The current climate has abandoned such past luxuries, and is clearly making it its mission to bring 'art' back to 'society' by popularising the culture, and resenting the decadence and exclusivity of high culture.

Much of Iranian culture exists in the public realm. Most noteworthy are the murals all over Iranian cities, portraying key political characters, events and slogans inscribed in classical calligraphy. Poetry, always a significant aspect of Iranian culture, functions today in public parks. For example, social messages on environmental preservation are spread across public billboards. Today, the literary field enjoys a large audience, with the current level of production exceeding all past records. Bookstores are extremely popular, in part replacing the previous meeting ground of Western cafes. Pop music, the fruit of the Shah's period of



Joseph thrown in the well by his brothers.

Europeanisation, has been virtually eliminated and replaced by classical music on radio and television. Finally, the screening of foreign films has been forbidden in movie theatres, while production of Iranian films, mostly financed by the government, has been successfully revitalised and is beginning to receive international acclaim.

Traditionally, Persian and Islamic Art have had their similarities and differences. While both are considered highly refined and technically complex, Persian Art has represented Persian courts and their elaborate kingdom, Islamic Art, on the other hand, is highly reflective of the spiritual and political

principals of Islam, representing the mass culture.

Islamic Art itself, has its variations, **Classic** and **Popular Art**. Classic Islamic Art, an intellectual trend with strong philosophical foundation, is closely associated with mystical movements, such as Sufism. Iranian Scholar, Seyeed Hossein Nasr in *Islamic Art and Spirituality* describes:

“Traditional Islamic art provides an ambiance in which God is remembered wherever one turns. It conveys the spirituality and essential message of Islam through a timeless language which, precisely because of its timelessness as well as its direct symbolism, is more effective and less

problematic than most of the theological explanations of Islam. It is the serenely intelligible, structured and highly spiritual character of Islamic art which more than any other element has helped to combat and off-set the very negative effect produced by that type of currently popular literature about Islam which would depict it as a violent, irrational and fanatical force.”

Popular Art, seems to speak about and to the masses, precisely those who felt economically, and culturally deprived by the Shah's government. Once dismissed as 'low-class art', this movement has returned with an enormous popularity. It speaks about a new sense of spiritual and political

commitment, an interest in rebuilding Islamic history, and reviving traditional values. To many contemporary Iranians, cultural purification relies heavily on the rediscovery of the past.

The dominant difference between Classical and Popular Islamic Art remains on the issue of politics. While Classical Islamic Art distances itself from war and politics, Popular Islamic Art is inseparable from politics. For instance, the ‘*Tragedies of Karbala*’, the assassination of *Imam Hosayn* in his battle for Islam, is depicted or played out in theatre over and over again. This event was largely used to re-introduce the notion of *Shahadat* (martyrdom) to the general public, and a significant force in motivating Iranian men to join the battle during the Iran/Iraq war. As

Ehsan describes: “the events of Karbala represent a ‘historical trend’, a paradigm through which we can conceptualize both history and the present social struggle. Martyrdom has become a dominant category in the struggle against foreign ideology and *Tragedies of Karbala* became a symbol of revolt and resistance for many people. To be a true Muslim was to follow his path and, like him, die for the cause.” Popular Art therefore, is dedicated to the revival of historical Islamic events and promoting the spirit of martyrdom by depicting scenes of bloodbaths and the sacrifice of Islamic saints.

One of the most significant forces within Popular culture is **Coffee-House painting**, originally established in the 16th and 17th century, during the

Safavid rule, and later revived in the early 20th century. This movement was developed by ‘ordinary’, non-trained artists, with a clear intention of shedding off the rapid Europeanisation of Iranian art. Often named the ‘school of imagination’, Coffee-House paintings depict national epics and religious events, such as the *Tragedies of Karbala*. Technically, they share none of the rules of the occidental paintings. Rather they follow the original concepts in Persian paintings, with no relation to perspective, realism or the visible manifestation of nature.

Since the Islamic revolution, this school of painting has been revitalized. A new generation of artists are closely identifying with this movement’s accessibility to the ‘masses’, and its



Departure of Kaykhosrow’s mother and grandmother toward Iran.

disassociation with the 'pompous' arts and literature that are alien to the character of ordinary people. Coffee house paintings speak of the significant role played by the coffee-houses, a collective-site where artists and poets are met by their community. A place for the common people to drink tea, rest and get pleasure, by looking at paintings and listening to the narrators recite epic poems from Iranian literary masterpieces such as *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, and other stories about religious heroes.

Another form of Popular culture is **Tazieh**, otherwise known as 'passion play', an interactive religious theatre where the audience plays out the tragedies of *Imam Hosayn* and his companions, with the actors. Presented in open, public spaces, Tazieh is a dramatic performance and public mourning of the brutal killing of this Islamic saint. Non-believers are not permitted to join the event as their presence may destroy the drama's spiritual climate.

Seventeen years after the Islamic revolution, however, new cultural trends are developing. While some Iranians remain committed to Islamic anti-Western objectives, others are disillusioned by the flaws of this 'purification' movement, and are beginning to resist the traditionalists. An icon that seems to capture this tension, is the presence of satellite dishes, all across city landscapes, importing Western pop culture into the living rooms of Iranian homes where the

screens are normally filled with religious, socially correct programs. Foreign journalists who have found their way into the borders of Iranian society, are thrilled to report the failures of the Islamic revolution to the outsiders, claiming that the unavoidable has occurred and that Western technology is outsmarting Islamic fundamentalism.

Whether a failure or a success in Iran, Islamic ideology is aggressively spreading all across the world, filling in many gaps within the lives of those Moslems who have either been deprived or unconvinced by 'Western values'. For many Middle Easterners, Islam is a governing set of principals, that offers a sense of autonomy, independence and validity in a world that they find hard to compete in.

Meanwhile, a mutual fear of the 'other side' - 'aggressor' - 'alien' continues to live with every one of us today, and it is precisely the presence of this fear that makes chances of

reconciliation obsolete. Fatimeh Mernissi, author of *Islam and Democracy: Fears of the Modern World* describes Moslems' fear as follows: "–*Gharb*, the Arabic word for the West, is also the place of darkness and the incomprehensible, always frightening. *Gharb* is the territory of the strange, the foreign (*gharib*). Everything that we don't understand is frightening. *Gharb* is the place where the sun sets and where darkness awaits. It is in the West that the night snaps up the sun and swallows it; then all terrors are possible. Facing what frightens us and understanding it is the only possible reflex. We are tired of being afraid."

Perhaps, now it's time for us to ask: "Why is the West so fearful of Islam?"

Shirin Neshat is an Iranian artist-photographer living and working in New York. She will have her first solo show at the Anina Nosei Gallery this coming October.



Siawash slain on Afrasyab's order.