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“Contemporary Iranian Art Introduction to the catalogue: ‘A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia,’”

Persia has played a major role in the history of art since ancient times. Its influence has had an impact not only on neighboring countries and in Asia, but also on the European continent. The treatment of color and the unique perspective found in the Persian miniature technique interested many Western artists, including the French painter Henri Matisse. Traces of its influence are also evident in the magnificent art of the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and other Asian cultures.

In more recent times, Iranian artists also found inspiration in the Western world, especially after the founding of the School of Fine Arts by Qajar court painter Kamal-al-Molk in 1911 following his study -travel to Europe. Techniques such as cast shadows, vanishing-point perspective and oil painting on canvas, popular today among Iranian artists, were melded with indigenous concepts, motifs and themes. This combination, based on the European influence and the Persian tradition of the importance of meaning and of conveying a message, gave many modern works of art a Persian identity.

In order to clarify this identity, we must have some understanding of two important aspects of traditional Iranian art, Persian painting and calligraphy. These two traditions have deeply inspired artists of this land for a very long time.

Persian Traditional Painting

The traditional style of painting, better known as the Persian miniature, has its roots in the rich heritage of the country. It was an important aspect of the “art of the book” which combined the techniques of illumination, painting and bookbinding. The technique developed by the Timurid princes of the fifteenth century was not only continued by the Safavid artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, but also adopted by the Ottoman courts to the west and the Mogul court to the east, where the Persian language was greatly respected.

Persian miniature painting combines both visual and literary art. It exhibits a world of transcendental nature, of eternally blooming flowers. The light that illuminates the scene does not shine from a material source; therefore it leaves no shadows. The colors are always bright; the subjects do not represent individuals and their faces show no trace of earthly emotion. The sky, the clouds, the trees, the streams, the men and women are all of archetypal origin. The events depicted take place in a timeless state of eternal bliss. These works of art have their roots firmly



planted in the fertile soil of the rich and profound literature of Iran. They seem to be visual translations of a fundamental concept in Islamic mysticism, manifested in the following verse by the thirteenth century poet Rumi:

*Every single part of the Universe Whispers to you
secretly day and night.
We listen, we see and we are conscious. But to you strangers to
the secrets of existence, we are silent.*

In modern times, many artists have developed a more independent version of the traditional style. Although prose or poetry is now rarely written next to these paintings as it once was, the essence of literature continues to inspire the traditional Persian artist.

Calligraphic Art

The art of Islamic calligraphy is considered to be the highest form of artistic expression in the Muslim world. This art, too, has its origin in literature, for it was revered as the vehicle for the Divine Word. Later, the profound mystic quality inherent in Persian literature provided further opportunity for letters to grow into ever more beautiful forms. Iranians have been credited with the invention of many styles of calligraphy, the most famous being *Nastaliq* and *Shekasteh*. These are still the most popular and widely used styles in Iran today. Calligrapher-artists have elevated them to an extremely refined art.

As artists became increasingly aware of the aesthetic quality of calligraphy and of the endless compositions that they could create using it, they began to look at written words as mere forms, not necessarily conveying any particular meaning. The *Shekasteh* (literally, broken) style easily and successfully moved towards abstraction, allowing the representation of their own feelings and emotions. The creation of new compositions, rhythms and movements became more and more important; the size of the letters increased, color and paint were adapted and calligraphy entered a new stage called *Khat Naghashi* (calligraphic painting). Many canvases have been created during the past two decades using calligraphic elements as pictorial motifs, thus bringing the art of Islamic calligraphy to new heights. The viewer will see examples of this trend in *A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia*.

What is Contemporary Art?

The term “contemporary” can be ambiguous, but is commonly defined as “living or occurring at the same time” or “belonging to the same age”. An artist who produces a work in the same manner as did generations of his ancestors is traditional. Does he belong to the same “age” as another artist whose art has nothing to do with his tradition or his lifestyle?



In ancient times, members of communities produced art based on shared value. Today's "contemporary" works of art, on the other hand, exhibit a wide variety of influences, inspirations and techniques. Elements of past and present, East and West, sacred and secular, are all present. Despite the tendency toward diversity of artistic expression and the fact that Persian motifs and designs in the works may have been produced in Western and "modern" styles, there are still many works that can be identified as traditional Persian or Irano-Islamic. These send messages from the past which inform the present. They, too, are contemporary, many completed only yesterday.

A Breeze from the Gardens of Persia shows the impact of cultures on one another. The works are auspicious signs of mankind searching for common ground that can elevate appreciation of God's creation to a higher level. Diversity, however, remains, not only for the sake of aesthetics, but also as a means of identity. While the world grows smaller and the existence of the global village becomes more and more evident, efforts to retain identity of cultures seem increasingly important. Contemporary art in Iran, registering the conditions of its age, reflects the need of mankind for both unity and diversity.

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