

LOST WORLDS

From Renoir to Warhol.
Rediscovering the legacy
of empress and art
collector Farah Pahlavi.

WORDS Miranda Darling

It's not every year that you get to spend Valentine's Day with an empress. And yes, real empresses do still exist, although this particular one is living in exile in Paris – which only adds to the dramatic appeal to anyone (like me) obsessed with history, geopolitics and espionage. So, on February 14, my co-conspirator and collaborator Viola and I found ourselves in an elegant, wood-panelled sitting room in a discreet location in the heart of the city.

The glass coffee table in the centre of the room held a curated mix of ancient Persian artefacts, books, bowls of pistachio nuts, glasses of tea in engraved silver holders, and fairy-tale cakes from Pierre Hermé: red macaroons sprinkled with rose petals that the famous baker had made just for Her Imperial Majesty; in her honour, she told us, the famed *pâtissier* had named them 'Isfahani cakes'.

We settled down on a dove-grey winter's afternoon to listen to the Empress Farah Pahlavi's stories of art collecting, imperial responsibilities, the transport potential of military aircraft, and friendships with Andy Warhol and Yves Saint Laurent.

"When I went back home to become the Queen of Iran," began the empress, "my husband said to me, 'When you are queen you will have a lot of responsibilities.' I said, 'Yes', but I could not imagine the scale of what was to come ..."

It was not the first time we'd met Her Imperial Majesty, but this didn't detract from our wonder. Each encounter has been memorable for her warmth and poise – and for the sheer historical and cultural

significance of her role in history.

It was Viola who first sparked my curiosity about the empress over kombucha in a vegan cafe: "Have you heard about the hidden art collection in Tehran?!" I hadn't, but with those few words, she had my full and undivided attention.

Please do go on.

The most valuable collection of Western art outside Europe or the United States is lying hidden in a basement in Tehran. Virtually no one has seen it in the past 30 years. Not only is the collection expensive, it's also comprised of the best of the best art: master works by Warhol, Kandinsky, Rothko, Pollock, Bacon, Picasso, Magritte, Henry Moore, Giacometti, Renoir ... the list goes on. And the entire thing was the brainchild of the empress, assembled in a few short years during the 1970s when Tehran stood as a gateway between the East and West, a thrumming city where avant-garde culture mixed energetically with the deep artistic traditions of Persia; a town where you might spot Andy Warhol roaming the streets with his camera, complaining about the heat, and ordering bowls of caviar from hotel room-service. Or maybe later Elizabeth Taylor, dressed in exotic silks, being photographed by Iranian artist Firooz Zahedi, or Nelson Rockefeller and his wife, Happy, enjoying a glass of bubbles with the royal couple.

That hidden collection is a portal into a lost world, into a time when Iran was truly a bridge between East and West, a country very different from the theocracy that has defined it for the past 30 years, certainly in the media. Equally fascinating – perhaps even more

so – is the story of the young woman who helped shape the artistic vision of a nation, a woman whose story and contribution were then buried by the revolution.

Farah Diba, as she was born, came from a respected Iranian family and went to Paris to study architecture at university. It was there that she met the then-ruler of Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. After a short but romantic courtship, she became his wife. Crowned Empress of Iran, she set about using the cash windfalls brought by the country's oil reserves to improve the lives of the women and children in her country, working with lepers and championing literacy, among other causes. Her true passion was for the arts, however, and she wanted both to preserve the artistic heritage of Iran and also to show Iranians what was out there – the art that

was being made in the West. The idea for the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art was conceived by the empress and designed by her cousin, architect Kamran Diba.

The young empress – often referred to as the Jackie Kennedy of the Middle East for her glamour and striking looks – buzzed about town in her blue-and-white helicopter, juggling four children, an imperial husband, and the exigencies of plans for the cultural advancement of the nation.

Niavaran Palace, Tehran: It's the morning of July 9, 1976, and Empress Farah Diba Pahlavi of Iran is waiting for Andy Warhol. To prepare for her portrait, she has chosen a cream silk blouse. Her make-up is minimal – only her eyes are rimmed with kohl – her hair is simple and elegant, arranged in a fashionable style. Warhol

arrives, accompanied by his manager Fred Hughes, to take a Polaroid with his Big Shot camera. It's the second time Warhol has been commissioned to do a portrait of a member of the Iranian royal family, the first of Princess Ashraf, twin sister of the Shah. Two years later, Warhol will be commissioned to do one of the Shah, to be unveiled in 1978 at the Shiraz Festival. However, before the festival can take place, the glittering guest list of international jetsetters all receive the same telegram: "*Due to illegal manifestations by extreme xenophobic groups, we regret to cancel this year's festival. But we will invite you again next year.*" The optimistic last sentence is misplaced: the festival will never take place again.

By January 16, 1979, the Shah and his army can no longer control the situation in Iran. A

succession of riots and strikes has brought the country to the edge of total disintegration and the Shah's security forces are clashing with Ayatollah Khomeini's supporters. The Shah and his wife are forced to flee to Egypt, and into a life of exile. They leave everything behind, including the art collection.

The artworks effectively disappear under the sands of the revolution and vanish from public consciousness; the cultural golden age of Iran also effectively vanishes from history with the regime change.

"North Tehran reminded me of Beverly Hills," said Bob Colacello, who accompanied Warhol on the trip in 1976. "Everyone lived around their pools, except there were Persian carpets next to the pools and little half-tents."

"Every artist in town [NYC] was running to Iran because they were giving out money



Andy Warhol's portrait of Farah Diba, in the couple's former residence at the Niavaran Palace, Tehran, 1979, GETTY IMAGES.

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for the arts and there were lucrative deals to be made,” recalled Andy Warhol’s cameraman, Vincent Fremont.

The Iran that emerged after the revolution in 1979 changed everything – not only the lives of everyday Iranians, but also the place of Iran on the world’s cultural radar. Under the Ayatollah, the old Iran dislocated and disappeared from Western public consciousness, becoming little more than a frightening and intolerant theocracy. The free and open flow of artists and ideas between East and West was turned off.

The collection at TMOCA has remained largely unseen – and even forgotten – until recently, when it was slated to travel to Berlin (2017). Suddenly, and just as mysteriously, the artworks were forbidden from leaving Tehran, and the exhibitions were cancelled. Who knows when – or even if – the wider world will get a chance to see these works again.

What happened during the revolution of 1979, and what came after, is well known and widely documented. But the artworks themselves – and the stories behind them – are an untold narrative of Iran, both a portal into a lost world and a blueprint of a culture that was abruptly truncated. This is the story that Viola and I have written, hoping to record the empress’s story but perhaps also to awaken in the collective awareness the question: *What If...?*

Farah Pahlavi is unable to return to Iran but still takes an active interest in the contemporary Iranian art scene, and the lives of young Iranians. Her situation and her story made Viola and I think about how many more women in history were out there, their stories untold, or buried in some way. 🐾

Miranda Darling and Viola Raikhel-Bolot founded production company Vanishing Pictures to tell the stories of women who have shaped the the art world but whose legacy remains in the shadows. The story of Empress Farah Pahlavi is out this year with Assoulime.



Coronation of the Shah and Farah Diba, 1966. GETTY IMAGES; Farah Diba, 1966. GETTY IMAGES.

