

The \$3bn Art Collection Hidden In Vaults

A new book reveals a collection bought by the wife of the Shah of Iran in the 1970s. Alastair Sooke talks to Farah Pahlavi, who was known as the Jackie Kennedy of the Middle East, about works by the likes of Bacon, Warhol and Picasso stored in the vaults of a Tehran museum.

By Alastair Sooke



Farah Pahlavi and Andy Warhol in front of his portrait of her at the Waldorf Astoria in New York on 13 July 1977

“The first time I met Andy Warhol was in Washington, at the White House,” says Farah Pahlavi, the exiled widow of the last Shah of Iran, who was overthrown during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Wearing a badge on her lapel in the shape of her homeland, emblazoned with the Pahlavi coat of arms, the 80-year-old ‘Shahbanu’, as Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s queen consort is still known among supporters, is sitting in a smart bookshop on Piccadilly in London, recalling a visit to the US in 1975, when she attended a dinner at the White House hosted by President Gerald Ford. In front of her is a copy of *Iran Modern: The Empress of Art*, a lavish new publication that tells the extraordinary story of a collection of around 150 modern Western artworks that Iran’s imperial government acquired during the 70s, under her supervision.

She touches the cover, which reproduces one of Warhol's portraits of her, with blue eyeshadow and pink lipstick, against a vivid yellow background. The portrait dates from 1976 – a year after that first meeting at the White House, when, according to Pahlavi, “Warhol was running from one room to another, because, apparently, he was afraid that I wanted to ask him to dance.” She smiles. “He was very shy.”

Not so shy, however, that the American Pop artist didn't agree to make a portrait of Pahlavi, who used to be known as the 'Jackie Kennedy of the Middle East'. In the summer of 1976, Warhol arrived with his manager, Fred Hughes, at what was then the empress's home, the Niavaran Palace in Tehran, to take a Polaroid of her, wearing a simple cream blouse, which he used as the source for a series of silkscreen portraits. “North Tehran reminded me of Beverly Hills,” recalled a member of the artist's entourage, Bob Colacello, who had stayed at the Intercontinental Hotel, where, apparently, Warhol relished ordering caviar from room service.

A couple of years later, Warhol was invited to make another portrait, of the empress's husband, though this time he was obliged to work from an official photograph. Yet, just a year after that, the Pahlavi dynasty was toppled, and the Shah fled to Egypt – where he died, in 1980 – with his wife and family. The former empress – who today, aged 80, lives between Maryland, in the US, and an elegant apartment overlooking the Seine in Paris – left behind Warhol's portraits, along with the rest of the 300 or so works of modern Western and Iranian art that she had amassed during the 70s, funded, with her husband's blessing, by the country's oil wealth.

Concealed collection

Today, that little-seen collection – which survives, almost intact, in the vaults of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA), which Pahlavi inaugurated on her birthday in 1977, with Nelson Rockefeller in attendance – contains masterpieces by the likes of Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti, René Magritte, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Mark Rothko. According to some estimates, it is now worth as much as \$3bn (£2.35bn).

Wasn't she tempted to take any of it with her, when she fled the country? “What I bought was for Iran,” she tells me, her soft brown eyes momentarily flashing with proud defiance, “not for me personally to take out”. Her only memento, she says, is a hairbrush that once belonged to Warhol, which she bought at auction after leaving Iran.



An Iranian woman looks at Sienna, Orange and Black on Dark Brown by Mark Rothko during an exhibition of modern art at TMOCA in 2015 (Credit: Getty Images)

According to Pahlavi, the story of Iran's collection of modern Western art – the greatest, and certainly most valuable, outside Europe and North America – starts with her own passionate interest in art and culture. Born Farah Diba in 1938, to an upper-class family in Tehran, she married the Shah – whom she had met at a reception at the Iranian embassy in Paris – in 1959, wearing a gown by Yves Saint Laurent. She was just 21, and became his third wife.

She was, she says, always conscious that she came from “a country of ancient civilisation and culture” – after all, Cyrus the Great had founded the first dynasty of the Persian Empire in 550 BC – and, in 1967, she established the annual Shiraz Arts Festival, in central Iran.

As the Shah's consort, she often bought paintings to support young Iranian artists – because, she recalls, “in those days, rich people bought ancient Iranian objects, not modern art. I was always telling the government to buy paintings, instead of ugly furniture.”



Farah married the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in December 1959 (Credit: Getty Images)

Ancient to modern

The seed for Iran's collection of modern Western art was sown in the late 60s, when the empress attended an exhibition opening and spoke to an Iranian artist called Iran Darroudi. "She told me, 'I wish we had a place where we could show our work' - and I said, 'It's a great idea: we should have a museum.'" As the plan coalesced, Pahlavi commissioned her cousin, the architect Kamran Diba, to design TMoCA on a former military parade ground adjacent to what is now Laleh (Tulip) - formerly Farah - Park. Diba, who also became the museum's founding director, was inspired by elements of traditional Persian architecture as well as the spiralling form of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The idea was that the institution should form part of a network of museums sponsored by the empress, including the national carpet museum, which was founded in 1976.



Pahlavi commissioned her cousin, the architect Kamran Diba, to design TMoCA on a former military parade ground (Credit: Alamy)

Having decided to build a new art museum, Pahlavi realised that it would need a collection. In the early 70s, Iran was rich: “It was a period when we had good revenue from oil,” she tells me, “though it was also when all our problems started.” To begin with, she considered buying back ancient Iranian artefacts, which, over the centuries, had been dispersed around the world. However, she quickly concluded that would prove too expensive, while modern Western art, which she also “admired”, was more affordable, and simpler to acquire. So, she amassed a team of advisers to build from scratch a world-class collection of modern art, starting with the Impressionists.

Her representatives began negotiating with galleries, and even travelled to New York to seek advice from The Met (“To see if a painting was good, and if the price was acceptable,” she explains). Meanwhile, she contacted the Maeght Foundation (a famous museum of modern art in the south of France, established in 1964) for help.

Within a very short space of time, Pahlavi’s team had assembled a collection of modern art that would be the envy of any institution on Earth. Her husband didn’t share her passion – “He was busy with so many other important things in Iran,” she says, “and wasn’t especially interested in foreign modern art” – but he supported the project, authorising the National Iranian Oil Company to bankroll her purchases (in 1973, Iran was the second-largest oil exporter in the world). As she puts it, “He always helped me if I needed a budget for this or that.” It just so happened that “this” might be Paul Gauguin’s *Still Life with Japanese Woodcut* (1889), and “that”, Pollock’s *Mural on Indian Red Ground* (1950) – valued by Christie’s, in 2010, at \$250 million.



Female visitors view *The Melody Haunts My Reverie* by American Pop Artist Roy Lichtenstein, on display at the TMOCA in 1999 (Credit: Getty Images)

In a sense, Pahlavi's acquisitions may be understood as consonant with the Shah's so-called 'White Revolution' of modernisation and progressive reforms. In *Iran Modern*, the former empress's co-authors, Viola Raikhel-Bolot and Miranda Darling, describe her as "a testament to the influence of soft power to change the fabric of a nation forever. Her vision and dedication turned the 1970s into a golden age for Iran."

To critics of the Shah, this may sound partisan. What did the Iranian people make of the modern art that she bought in the 70s? "You know," replies Pahlavi, "even today, in England or New York, you cannot expect everybody to love modern art. But these were treasures of art for the country. Art brings people together more than any political speech."

Yet, didn't her expenditure contribute to a perception of the profligacy of the Shah's regime, which may in turn have contributed to his downfall? She frowns. "Not at all, not at all. There was not one negative reaction."

As well as spending time with Warhol, while building up the collection, the empress met several artists whom she admired, including Salvador Dalí, Marc Chagall (who lived near the Maeght Foundation), and the British sculptor Henry Moore, whose rural studio, outside London in the Hertfordshire hamlet of Perry Green, she once visited. "When I entered," she recalls, "he showed me a little painting, and said, 'I ask everybody to tell me who did it.' Thank God, I said Miró - which was the right answer. I was very proud, of course."



Visitors view Andy Warhol's portrait of Mao Tse-tung at TMOCA (Credit: Getty Images)

According to reports, one of Moore's sculptures, in TMOCA's gardens, has been damaged by a bullet. The hole is still visible: a reminder, most likely, of the turmoil of the Revolution.

One of the most surprising things about the history of Iran's collection of modern art is that, in the wake of the Revolution, it was largely neither damaged nor dispersed. There were exceptions: Pahlavi (who was condemned to death, in absentia, after the Revolution) recalls watching a French television documentary, which showed that one of Warhol's portraits of her, which had hung prominently in the palace in Tehran, had been slashed with a knife.

Moreover, in 1990, *Woman III* (1953), by the Abstract Expressionist painter Willem de Kooning, was exchanged for some 16th-Century Persian miniatures owned by an American art collector. In a scene worthy of a thriller movie, the swap took place on the tarmac at Vienna's international airport.

For years, though, the collection languished, unseen, in the vaults of the museum in Tehran. In 2005, a few of the paintings were publicly exhibited in Iran. Quite why this cache of modern art has never attracted the ire of the rulers of the anti-Western theocracy that is the Islamic Republic of Iran remains a mystery. (Presumably, the art's value made it untouchable.) Certain paintings, such as Renoir's *Gabrielle with Open Blouse* (1907), which features a model with naked breasts, can never be exhibited in Iran.

Meanwhile, last year, a selection of highlights from the collection – which were going to be shown in Berlin and Rome, in an international touring exhibition, before plans were cancelled at the last minute – went on display at TMoCA. However, according to a journalist from The Sunday Times, who visited the show, the exhibition had only been open for two hours, before censors arrived to remove the middle panel of a 1968 triptych by Francis Bacon, depicting two naked male figures lying side by side upon a bed. (“Look carefully,” Christina Lamb wrote. “The hooks are still there.”) Homosexuality, in Iran, is illegal.

Pahlavi politely refuses to speculate why Iran’s post-Revolution leaders neither sold off nor destroyed the collection she created. I wonder, though, how she feels while leafing through Iran Modern, which reproduces so many artworks that she is unlikely to see again in person: sad? “No,” she replies, speaking softly and slowly, “I am not sad. After the Revolution, I was very worried for these paintings. But, fortunately, except for one exchange, they are all still there. I remember, a few years ago [in 2005], one of the directors [of the museum] put some of the paintings [on display] in an exhibition – and I received an email from a young lady, an Iranian painter, who said, ‘When I found myself in front of a Rothko, I had tears in my eyes.’” TMoCA owns two Rothkos, each valued today at between \$100 million and \$200 million.

“So, I’m happy that people can see what they have, because these paintings” – she gestures to Iran Modern, on the table before her – “belong to Iran”. She pauses. “I always say that the seeds you plant with love and belief never perish, never die.”

Iran Modern: The Empress of Art ([Assouline](#), £650), by Viola Raikhel-Bolot and Miranda Darling, is out now.

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