

## Farah Pahlavi interview: on marriage to the Shah, her unseen art collection and the future of Iran

by Charles Bremner



The 1959 wedding of the Shah of Iran and the 21-year-old Farah Pahlavi

Andy Warhol's portrait of the Empress of Iran adorns the cover of a massive new art book in the Paris home of Christie's auction house. The 1977 silkscreen is projected in an auditorium. Then the icon herself walks in and her admirers stand in respect.

Forty years after the overthrow of the shah and the couple's flight into exile, Farah Pahlavi is as regal as ever as she accepts the reverence of her former subjects. There also to greet her is her longtime friend, Frédéric Mitterrand, a television arts presenter who served as culture minister for Nicolas Sarkozy. Her Majesty, as the Paris Iranians still call their former queen, is tall and elegant in beige trousers and cream tunic with Persian motifs.

Meeting Pahlavi, you flash back to the era when she was a global star and symbol of a modernising, westward-looking Iran. As a student, I had glimpsed her in the summer of 1972, speeding down a Tehran boulevard in a huge black Mercedes as young women in miniskirts waved from the pavement. Eight years later, I was part of the press pack that was kept at bay as she nursed her ailing husband on the Panamanian island of Contadora, unwanted by Jimmy Carter and other erstwhile friends. Bored reporters had printed cynical T-shirts reading, "Shah Death Watch '80". Four months later, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi died of cancer, aged 60, now in Egypt as the guest of President Sadat.



With Andy Warhol in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 1977

Now 80, Pahlavi says she does not miss the glamour of the times when leaders and artists would pay homage at her husband's court and the shah made her empress, placing a massive jewelled crown on her head. "But I miss what Iran used to be," she says. Her voice is wistful as she recounts her saga of loss - all in French - alone on a sofa sipping tea before she goes downstairs for the Iran Modern book presentation. The volume is the story of the spectacular art collection that she amassed for her country as queen and which remains at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. The biggest trove of impressionist, modern and contemporary works outside Europe and the United States, conservatively estimated to be worth \$3 billion (£2.35 billion), remains largely unseen in the basement.

The queen's grand project opened in 1977 in the museum by Laleh Park, Tehran, designed by Kamran Diba, an architect cousin of the queen. It included just about everyone who counted, from Gauguin, Picasso and Rothko to Miró, Lichtenstein, Magritte and Munch. In those days, Iranians were respected everywhere in the world, says the woman who was called the Jackie Kennedy of the east. "Now you say you're from Iran and people look at you as if you'd said you come from God knows where. For 90 countries in the world, Iranians didn't need a visa. Now, even with a foreign passport, they stop you at the frontier with 10,000 questions."

The shahbanu – queen consort – has spent her long exile mainly in Paris, the city where she was studying when she caught the eye of the twice divorced shah in 1959. Home is a house overlooking the Seine. Since Ronald Reagan let her back into the United States in the Eighties, she has also lived in New England and now in Maryland, close to Reza, her 58-year-old son. In his mother’s eyes, and those of many of the four million or so Iranians abroad, Reza remains crown prince, heir to the “peacock throne” and the potential saviour of his nation.

Life has not been materially hard, Pahlavi agrees, but she scoffs at claims by the Islamic Republic of Iran – made in a 1979 lawsuit – that the shah and his wife looted the treasury and stashed \$36.5 billion abroad. “It’s all lies. If there had been the billions people talk about, I wouldn’t be here. I’d be in Tehran,” she says. “I live well, thank God, but I am helped by two people whom I won’t name.”

Devoting her life at a distance to the cause of the shah’s orphaned people has enabled her to survive terrible knocks, she says. These have included the recent deaths by their own hands of two of her four children. Leila succumbed to an overdose of barbiturates in a London hotel in 2001 at the age of 31. Ali-Reza, 44, shot himself while at Harvard studying for a PhD in 2011. “I have down moments, but I have to get on with things,” Pahlavi says. “You have to find ways of not letting the people who put you in this state be the winners.”

She is fuelled by bitterness for the mullahs who, in her view, fomented revolution in 1978 with the connivance of communists, drove out a beloved monarch and crushed his people under Islamic dictatorship. Many Iranians see things differently. They put much of the blame for Iran’s misfortunes – the mullahs’ rule; the war with Iraq in the Eighties – on the excesses of the ruthless US-backed shah and repression by the Savak, his notorious secret police.

The critics include many in the well-heeled Iranian diaspora, concentrated in Los Angeles and Paris. They believe that they and their descendants would still be enjoying life in the plush neighbourhoods of north Tehran and skiing in the nearby Alborz mountains if the “King of Kings” had not got carried away with his rush to modernise and dazzle the world with a glitzy revival of ancient, pre-Islam Persia.

For some of the exiled Iranian aristocracy, the shah himself was a vulgar parvenu because his father, Reza Pahlavi, was a former army private and peasant’s son. The founder of the Pahlavi “dynasty” eventually landed on the throne in 1925 after the British helped him stage a coup in 1921.



With the Queen, Amsterdam, 1962

Most agree that the blunder that sowed the seeds of revolution in the Seventies was the shah's sumptuous celebration at Persepolis in 1971 of the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian empire by Cyrus the Great. At the time, Ayatollah Khomeini called the jamboree the "Devil's festival". The king and queen played host to hundreds of leaders and celebrities at what was dubbed the biggest party in history, costing more than \$100 million according to The New York Times. Among them were Imelda Marcos of the Philippines, Monaco's Prince Rainier and Princess Grace, Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie and Nicolae Ceausescu, the Romanian dictator, and his wife, Elena. The Duke of Edinburgh and Princess Anne represented Britain after the Queen was advised to stay away for security reasons."

Pahlavi, however, finds no fault in her late husband's reign. "His Majesty", as she still calls him, was for her the wise and beloved father of a grateful nation. "He did not go too fast with modernisation. The shah was a philosopher. He loved his homeland. All his life, all his thoughts, his intelligence was for the progress and the development of Iran," she says. He just wanted to help a backward country by using its oil wealth to build hospitals, roads, schools and factories, she says, breaking off with a bitter joke: "Straight from Cyrus the Great to Khomeini - you can't beat that."

Thanks to social media, Pahlavi keeps in closer touch than ever with people in the Islamic Republic and hears how much they miss the old days, she says. “I don’t lose hope for Iran because now, with all the unhappiness and all the problems, people are seeing what their country was and what it could have become if this regime hadn’t taken over,” she says. “There are lots of slogans and even young people are shouting for Reza Shah, the father of my husband. What touches me is the affection of the young who were born after the revolution, who’ve heard so many negative things about us. When I meet them abroad in other countries, they come up to me with so much affection, and kiss me and take pictures. I say, ‘Aren’t you afraid having my picture?’ and they say, ‘No, we don’t care.’ ”

It is natural, she says, that Iranians yearn for a return of the shah. Reza is working – from his Washington DC base – to offer himself, should they want one day to restore him at the head of a democratic monarchy. She paints a baleful picture of her homeland. “The people are so unhappy. They don’t have enough to eat,” she says. “The workers aren’t paid. Teachers, intellectuals and journalists are in prison. Women are so badly treated, they don’t have the courage to take off their head cover. There’s so much drug addiction and prostitution. There are young people committing suicide and immolating themselves. I admire the courage of Iranian women. I’ve cut out a saying and put it in my Paris house: ‘If you’re a real man, come to Iran and be a woman.’ ”

Why, widowed at only 41, has she never remarried and moved beyond the memory of her late husband? “It never crossed my mind,” Pahlavi says.

She recalls the day when the Iranian embassy invited her to a reception for the visiting shah. He had been on the throne for more than a decade and had ended his marriages to Princess Fawzia of Egypt and then Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiary, an Iranian of renowned beauty. Fawzia had one daughter; Soraya produced no children.

The future empress was the sports-minded daughter of the Dibas, a well-to-do Tehran family. She had captained the basketball team at the École Jeanne d’Arc, the Catholic girls’ school favoured by the Francophile elite in Tehran. In Paris, she was studying architecture at the École Spéciale d’Architecture and living at the Cité Universitaire, the student residence by the Parc Montsouris. “There were lots of boys and only six or seven girls, and the boys said the girls studied architecture to find a husband,” she says, recalling the fun of Paris in 1959. “I was so proud to be presented to the king. It wasn’t a coup de foudre [love at first sight]. But a member of my family who was there said, ‘When the king was leaving, he looked at you.’ ” she says.



At the White House with President Kennedy, first lady Jackie Kennedy and her husband, April 1962

Pahlavi had been given a tip on coping with such hefty headgear by our Queen. “After an official dinner we accompanied the Queen and Prince Philip to their apartments. She took off her tiara, saying, ‘Phew! That’s better.’ I saw that inside the tiara there was velvet and cotton to lighten the pressure. The Queen helped me manage with the crown much more easily.”

I decide not to raise the matter of the shah’s reputation for philandering or his attitude to women, as revealed in an oft-quoted remark from him: “In a man’s life, women count only if they are beautiful, graceful and know how to stay feminine. You may be equal in the eyes of the law, but not in ability. You have never produced a Michelangelo or a Bach or even a great cook.” He confirmed his dim view of women’s abilities in a subsequent discussion in 1977 with Barbara Walters, the grande dame of US television interviewers.

The young queen gained influence with her husband, who sent her around the country promoting education and health issues. She also had a mission to broaden Iran’s cultural heritage by using some of the oil wealth to create a western modern art collection. The idea was to compensate partly for the loss of Persian art that had been taken abroad through the centuries. She met Warhol at Gerald Ford’s White House and later sat for him. The portrait was sliced up after the revolution, when the mullahs ordered the deaths of the king and queen. The shah did not pose for the portraits of him that Warhol also produced, says his widow. Pahlavi throws out a roll call of artistic geniuses: “I met Chagall in the south of France; I knew Dalí in Paris, Henry Moore in London.” One Moore bronze in the Tehran museum was nicked by a bullet in the revolution.

Many of the 200 pictures and sculptures feature in the new book. Iranians have been snapping up the \$845 volume – the first 1,500-print run sold out when it was launched in New York.

Pahlavi remains in touch with the Tehran museum, which has kept the Toulouse-Lautrec, Francis Bacon, Jackson Pollock, Van Gogh and the rest of the collection, all except one work. Willem de Kooning's *Woman III* was exchanged for a rare volume of the *Shahnameh*, the 11th-century Persian Book of Kings. "Indirectly I know what's happening with the museum. I know that some of the works are on display but a lot are still in the basement," she says. "I used to be worried that something bad would happen to the pictures, but apart from the one exchanged, they're OK."

The couple's trouble began, she says, with the oil boom and Opec forcing up prices in the early Seventies. Iran was wrongly blamed, she says. "They said we were destroying the European economy." The shah angered his western allies but the absolute monarch was not to blame for the public anger that exploded in the streets in 1978, says his widow. She accepts that the security services, feared for their cruelty, went too far. And while concentrating on communist opponents of the regime, she says, they failed to detect the growing threat from the religious leaders who were angered by the shah's opening up of society and granting rights to women. "They didn't see what was coming."

In the end, there was nothing that the shah could do right. "The opposition was against everything. Even university people claimed to see the image of Khomeini in the moon." That phenomenon, "witnessed" by millions, was celebrated in mosques in 1978 as a holy sign of the exile's imminent return.

In January 1979, the couple fled and, shunned by their friends in the west, had to beg for haven. Their fate was sealed when President Giscard d'Estaing of France put Khomeini, the fundamentalists' figurehead, on an Air France jet from Paris. Khomeini landed in Tehran on February 1 to a joyous welcome by crowds who hailed him as the nation's new leader.

The shah was suffering from advanced non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, but President Carter, who had washed his hands of the Pahlavis, would only allow him brief treatment in a US hospital in 1979. As vengeance for his presence there, the revolutionaries seized the American embassy in Tehran and started the Iran hostage crisis. Anwar Sadat and his wife, Jehan, a friend of the queen, provided a final haven in Cairo, and the shah is buried there.



Farah Pahlavi with son Reza in Paris, 2008

“We were in the western camp [but] when I saw the way they treated us, especially the king, bouncing from one country to another, well ...” Her voice trails off. She has forgiven Giscard d’Estaing, now 92 and still active in French public life. Jehan Sadat remains a friend and Pahlavi says that she keeps in touch with some European royalty. “I was at the 80th birthday celebrations for Queen Sofia of Spain last month. The royal families we knew were very kind in the difficult times.” Travelling now is not too difficult. Some countries provide security for her, but others don’t. “I have to be careful.”

The loss of her two children is a heavy burden. She blames their struggles with depression and, in Leila’s case, anorexia. “It was hard for them, with all they heard in Tehran and all the terrible things that were said about us in the media in other countries. They were surrounded by people who only said negative things. Ali-Reza was so intelligent, so cultivated in the history of Iran, with such a sense of humour. Leila had so many friends. She was so sociable.” Pahlavi has four grandchildren, three of them daughters of Reza and then the seven-year-old daughter who was born to her late son’s companion. She is a believer in the healing powers of sport, she says. Tennis and skiing helped her in the earlier years of exile “and there was meditation and yoga and the cassettes that we used to have that told you how to feel better”.

“I’ve stood up to things until now. Tant mieux [fortunately]. And then one day I won’t do so any more. I thank God for what I have that’s positive and I compare myself with the millions who are worse off.”

What does she miss most of her homeland after half her life in exile? “The landscape, the scent of jasmine, the snow on Damavand,” she says, referring to the 18,000ft peak, her country’s highest mountain, northeast of Tehran. “I miss the rivers, the trees, the kindness, the gentleness of people in the countryside.”

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