

How Her Imperial Majesty Queen Farah Pahlavi Built an Art Empire

by Caterina Minthe



Her Imperial Majesty Empress Farah Pahlavi, photographed in Paris. Courtesy Iran Modern: The Empress of Art ([Assouline](#))

As she celebrates her 80th birthday, Her Imperial Majesty Empress Farah Pahlavi remembers the art collection she established – unseen for 40 years – in a new book.

“As I write this, 38 years have passed since I left Iran and my life as queen. However, the love for my country and compatriots remains as strong as ever. I so cherish my memories of Iran,” begins Her Imperial Majesty Empress Farah Pahlavi in the foreword to a new book, *Iran Modern: The Empress of Art* ([Assouline](#)). The daughter of an affluent Iranian family, Farah Diba became queen in 1959 when she married Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi at age 21, thus embarking on an extraordinary life journey filled with both joy and hardship, that would ultimately lead to exile. “When I first returned home from being a student in France to become the queen of Iran, the Shah said to me, ‘When you are queen, you will have a lot of responsibilities.’ I agreed, of course, but I could not imagine the scale of what lay ahead.”

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Having studied abroad in Switzerland and France – notably architecture in Paris – the empress started a mission to develop her country’s social fabric, education, and culture. She founded the Pahlavi University, an American-style school designed to improve women’s educational opportunities. In parallel, she sought to preserve Iran’s ancient culture while nurturing emerging art. “My position as queen allowed me to act rather than only sympathize with the young artists,” she recalls. It was during an art showcase in the late 1960s that the notion for a museum of contemporary art first came to her.



Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran, with the Empress and their son, Crown Prince Reza, 1967. Rex

“A female artist participating in this exhibition told me how she wished for a permanent location for Iranian artists to display their projects. It was then that I commissioned my cousin Kamran Diba to design the museum building and we began acquiring art.” While they couldn’t afford old, foreign masterpieces, they did have the funds – largely supplied by the National Iranian Oil Company – for modern art. Along with advisors from Sotheby’s, Christie’s, the Maeght Foundation, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she began to oversee acquisitions of works by impressionist and contemporary artists.

In July 1976, pop artist Andy Warhol traveled to Niavaran Palace in Tehran to prepare the empress’s portrait. Tall, with Venetian blonde hair styled in a loose chignon and kohl-rimmed eyes, the empress, who favored fashions by Balenciaga and Yves Saint Laurent, chose an elegant cream blouse for the occasion of her sitting for her Polaroid snapshot. It was hardly her only meeting with a revealed artist of the age. The empress enjoyed the company of many. She met with Henry Moore at his studio, Salvador Dalí in Paris, the sculptor César, Arnaldo Pomodoro, and Chagall, to name a few.



The Empress with Andy Warhol in Tehran, 1977. Courtesy Iran Modern: The Empress of Art ([Assouline](#))

Moore would create a large bronze statue that would ultimately find a home in the garden of the Diba-designed museum, along with pieces by Giacometti, Ernst, Magritte, and Calder. The brutalist, concrete building itself was inspired by Persian wind towers and the New York Guggenheim and featured a spiral staircase to the underground, where galleries led from the center point. "The modern art in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA) reflects how Iran, during that era, found itself at the center of East and West. I view art and culture as an eternal permanent institution. It is important for uniting people," states Her Imperial Majesty. She recalls, "A woman artist emailed me and said, 'I had tears in my eyes when I stood in front of Rothko.'" In 1979, the fall of the empire signaled her family's exile and, along with it, the shuttering of the works into a safe below ground. And while only one artwork was sold - a painting by De Kooning - all reportedly remain in the safe. The collection has never left Iran.

The TMoCA, which was inaugurated on Her Imperial Majesty's birthday in 1976, was not the only museum to close; in her 20 years as queen of Iran, she also created the Negarestan Museum; a museum of Persian carpets; museums and galleries filled with Iranian ceramics, clay, bronze, and miniatures; four cultural centers; three national arts festivals; three research exploration and science institutes; the City Theatre of Tehran; the Abguineh Museum featuring glassware and ceramics; and the Museum of Reza Abbasi for pre- and post-Islamic objects.



Women look at Picasso's "Fenêtre Ouverte Sur la Rue de Penthièvre" at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009. Getty

Following a veritable "labor of love," as described by authors Viola Raikhel-Bolot and Miranda Darling, the works, unseen for decades – including pieces by Van Gogh, Monet, Kandinsky, Rothko, Picasso, Bacon, Pollock, Braque, and Miró – have now been catalogued over a period of three years and published together for the first time in *Iran Modern: The Empress of Art*. "I am pleased to see the depiction of so many of the collected art works here in this book," comments Her Imperial Majesty. "Hopefully it will inspire young Iranians to pursue their commendable creativity and remind the world of the cultural patrimony of Iran. Optimistically, things will soon begin to change, allowing the opportunity for more people to personally view these art works and get acquainted with the rich culture of Iran."

Her Majesty's quotes courtesy of authors of *Iran Modern: The Empress of Art* ([Assouline](#)) Viola Raikhel-Bolot and Miranda Darling