

# Tehran museum hosts exhibition of modern Arab art

Paintings by Arab artists are displayed alongside works by Iranians, underlining cultural bond despite political tensions



Fatigued Ten Horses Converse with Nothing (The Martyr's Epic), by the Iraqi artist Kadhim Hayder, on show in Tehran. Photograph: Barjeel Art Foundation

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Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art is hosting an exhibition of modern Arab art from countries including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, underlining a regional cultural bond that has

thrived despite the simmering tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbours.

TMoCA, which has the finest collection of modern western art anywhere outside Europe and the US, boasting works by the likes of Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon and Andy Warhol, is displaying 40 pieces by prominent Arab artists alongside 40 paintings by Iranians.

This year has brought a new low in already fractured relations between powerful countries in the Arab world and the predominantly Persian state, including a palpable animosity between Tehran and Riyadh over regional conflicts and the execution in Saudi Arabia of a Shia cleric, which led to an attack on the Saudi embassy in the Iranian capital.

Mohsen Noferesti, an official from TMoCA, said it had maintained its cultural ties with the outside world regardless of the political situation.

“Even at the time of sanctions we hosted works from many parts of the world,” he said. The Sea Suspended show exhibits modern Arab art from the 1940s to the 1990s from places such as Egypt, Iraq, north Africa, the Levant and the Arabian peninsula.

Noferesti said the exhibition had been warmly welcomed in Tehran and visited by hundreds of people every day.

Karim Sultan of the Sharjah-based Barjeel Art Foundation, who curated the show in collaboration with the museum and the Tehran-based Mohsen gallery, said art had the power to transcend politics.

“What we were really aiming for was more of a cultural dialogue, to open up a conversation about art and the artists,” he told the Guardian. “I’d say the exhibition would have had to take place regardless of the political situation because of the importance of art. Whatever the situation is, art has a way of moving over the situation, and a lot of people engage in a different kind of conversation, perhaps in a positive way.”

Sultan said various exhibitions and museums in the UAE, including in Dubai, had for some time featured works by Iranian artists. The Third Line, a Dubai-based art gallery, represents Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, who had a major exhibition at the New York museum last year. The Sharjah art foundation has displayed a major art show of Farideh Lashai.

“It’s not out of a vacuum that we proposed to do a show; it comes as a response in a long cultural conversation that is taking place,” Sultan said. “The exhibition that just opened in Tehran was one that came out of an impetus to continue that conversation. Tehran is a very important city in the region and a museum like TMoCA is an incredible institution that has a lot of history.”

TMoCA, which was founded before the 1979 Islamic revolution under the supervision of Farah Pahlavi, the former queen of Iran, has hidden treasures bought before the revolution thought

to be worth more than \$2.5bn. It includes Pollock's Mural on Indian Red Ground, considered to be one of his most important works and estimated to be worth more than \$250m, as well as important pieces by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Whistler and Marcel Duchamp.

In 2012, the museum took around 100 works out of its basement for a first show of its kind as part of its Pop Art & Op Art exhibition, featuring works by Warhol, David Hockney, Roy Lichtenstein and others. That year Pahlavi gave an interview to the Guardian about the history of the collection.

Shiva Balaghi, an independent art scholar based in the US, said the new exhibition represented a "historic moment of cultural exchange" which had given audiences in Tehran a rare opportunity to see "the best of Arab art".

Balaghi said Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, the founder of Barjeel, had been a major supporter of Iranian art. "Over the past decade, the UAE has emerged as an important centre for Iranian art. The galleries and collectors that are based there have helped stimulate the Iranian art market," she said.

"No doubt the art of masters like Parviz Tanavoli, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, and Farideh Lashai received greater international recognition because of their exhibitions in the UAE. Meanwhile, Dubai has become a growing art hub, where international curators have discovered a younger generation of Iranian artists like Mehdi Farhadian, Golnaz Fathi and Ala Ebtekar."



Visitors look at a painting by the Iranian artist Kazem Chalipa at the opening of the show. Photograph: Atta Kenare/AFP/Getty Images

Among the works on display in the modern Arab art show are the Iraqi artist Kadhim Hayder's spectacular *Fatigued Ten Horses Converse With Nothing (The Martyr's Epic)*; the Saudi artist Mounirah Mosly's *The Land of Solidities*; and the UAE artist Hassan Sharif's *Man*. Other artists represented include Bahrain's Abdullah Muharraqi, Palestine's Asim Abu Shakra, Iraq's Raffa Nasiri and Egypt's Seif Wanly.

TMoCA is planning to lend some of its treasures to museums and galleries in Berlin and Rome in the near future. Some works were due to go on display in Berlin earlier this year but the recent resignation of Iran's cultural minister, who stepped down under pressure from hardliners, has delayed the plans.

There are concerns in Iran about the fate of its hidden treasures. Many artists, including the celebrated painter Aydin Aghdashloo, have expressed concerns about the conditions under which the paintings are held in the museum, and Lili Golestan, a prominent gallery owner, has complained about the secrecy surrounding the works.

"There is a lot of secrecy. We don't know which works are being sent [on loan]. We have asked but they don't respond," she told Isna news agency.

Some of the works stacked in the museum's basement are gathering dust and have never been put on display; the exact number of such paintings is unclear.

*The Sea Suspended runs until 23 December at Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art*

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