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Art Education in Iran Women's Voices

MEHRI HONARBIN-HOLLIDAY

University art education was first established in Iran on the Marvi school premises in Tehran in 1939 (AH 1319) and moved to its present location, at Tehran University campus, in 1949. The move was part of an evolutionary process of teaching art, as a specialized subject, at secondary schools (*honar-estan*) founded by the late nineteenth-century Qajar court painter, Mohammad Ghaffari Kamál al-Mulk. These schools taught art history, and the science of painting (*elme naqashi*) and carving (*hajjari*) in the style of the Academy of Paris. Some classes also taught design elements within traditional Iranian art. Such new ways of teaching were in sharp contrast to the long-standing system of master-pupil apprenticeship.² Currently there are roughly ten institutions in Tehran where the arts, and in some cases crafts, are taught awarding B.A., M.A., and occasionally Ph.D. degrees.

Continuity and change in Iranian art education

Al-Zahra University is the only national women's university accommodating several faculties including the Faculty of Applied Arts where both male and female tutors teach the plastic arts. It was founded in 1964 during the Pahlavi regime as the Institute of Higher Education for Girls, re-named for a very brief period as Mahboobeh Moteahedin Institute after the 1979 Revolution, and finally registered as Al-Zahra University in memory of the Prophet's daughter. It is built on the site of a small shrine and orchards in rural Vanak, donated by a nineteenth-century courtesan specifically for the education of women. It has made higher education available to a considerable number of female students whose family traditions are not in favour of co-education. A great

Art education is thriving in Iran despite facing obstacles by some conservative Islamic elements. Women are especially active in making and exhibiting art in the contemporary period. Through an ethnographic enquiry into women's art education at the Tehran and Al-Zahra Universities, the ways in which women assert themselves as highly active members of a complex and changing society will be examined. Ethnographic research allows for long-held stereotypes to be corrected, truer versions of reality to come to the fore, and hopefully, the spaces and texts of "the other" to be better understood.¹

number of the students at Al-Zahra wear the chador, a form of Islamic cover, and come from the traditionalist and neo-traditionalist religious classes.³ Politically speaking, while some students and staff advocate the hard-line policies of the government, others oppose them. The students from the Applied Arts Faculty come from more varied social and political backgrounds and often show more daring in their work. Commenting on her female students, one tutor points out, "the female students cannot be ignored [for they are] highly autonomous in their conduct and in their ideas."

Twenty-one year old Atoosa appears to break taboos when she expresses, "I like to paint images of my own body, sometimes without clothes. Well it is only a body and we all have one, don't we? My body, your body, it is a common language, that's all."

Nudity and erotic art are neither practiced nor publicly tolerated in the Islamic Republic. The hard-liners and most tutors frown upon the idea of "life class" modelling where models pose in a state of undress for close study of human anatomy and form. Nevertheless, artists widely push and negotiate boundaries in their depictions of the human figure. Figure drawing and painting exist at both Tehran and Al-Zahra Universities where form is studied through plaster casts and fully clothed models. Although partially-clothed figure paintings do not get exhibited at the finals' shows, tutors critically engage with their students' work. They do not invoke notions of "haram" (religiously forbidden) or "halal" (religiously permitted) in art classes; such words belong more appropriately to discussions amongst the clergy in sermons and mosques. The discourse in these art classes is primarily a universal art discourse.

Nevertheless, there is widespread concern, both from the student body and most tutors, that the curriculum, with its excessive focus on Islamic subjects is not sympathetic to the teaching of art as a discipline. The curriculum places emphasis on the 1979 Revolution and religious ethics formulated according to the religious scholars of Qom. Yet, the curriculum also provides an expansive historical context for studying art. Students learn about art in Muslim civilizations, its interconnection with Spanish and Byzantine art, Persian antiquity with its systems of belief, architecture and motifs, and Islamic iconology and its impact on the arts and architecture of the Muslim world from India to Spain. The history of painting and sculpture, including the Western heritage, are taught according to their relevancy to these aforementioned subjects rather than as the arts of the "West." As one student pointed out, "When we studied the Renaissance, our tutor talked about every single painter in that period who had ap-

**Drawing atelier,
Visual Arts
Department,
Tehran
University,
2002**



PHOTO BY MEHRI HONARBIN-HOLLIDAY, 2002



**Self-portraits,
Al-Zahra
University,
2002**

PHOTO BY MEHRI HONARBIN-HOLLIDAY, 2002

plied a mere brush mark onto a church wall... He made it like a wonderful story. I love art history, and it is ridiculous to say West and East too much. I am a citizen of the globe, a member of the global village. If I am to be an artist, all of art history is my heritage."

Adaptation and resistance in art departments

Art, like other disciplines, has experienced some strain with the rise of the Islamic Republic. A non-academic body, the Ethics Council (*heraasat*), is at large on university campuses. Members of the Ethics Council pride themselves on their Islamic zeal and apply their authority across social institutions as they see appropriate. Their tasks include keeping a check on the overall appearance, dress code, and general conduct of the student body, particularly women. Many women, unable to withstand the mechanisms of control, have been pushed out of the academic and art world altogether, but they have demonstrated resilience and agency, finding new ways of making their contributions independent of formal state institutions. As one such woman relates, "I had a gallery and a bookshop. I had to give up both as a consequence of the change of regime. But you know my skin is tough, it has to be. I am a woman....The 1979 revolution has been like a wave in the streets, it has not really touched the interiors, our hearts. I don't believe the rest of the world has any idea about secular life in this country. I have had to re-establish myself. Instead of teaching at universities, I work from home as a translator and editor of art and academic books...and I'm the main breadwinner in the family. I have educated two of my children at home and they are reasonably good artists now."

Those who have remained within the university system are often penalized when it comes to promotion and tenure, for tenure status is rarely granted to anyone who resists the government's prescribed line. Some tutors, to make ends meet, work part-time teaching posts in the provinces and travel far to reach their classes. Many of the faculty and staff nevertheless, continue to derive energy and hope from their close association to the world of art. As one tutor elucidates:

"I have been teaching art for the last eighteen years at two universities whilst also practicing and exhibiting painting. I love being around my students. They give me energy. I get up in the morning and put my lipstick on and wear my headscarf and go to work. I need the income....I have supported my family financially all my married life and I am proud to have helped my students to get into universities in Japan

and Germany. Sadly, in the West, there is no consciousness of women like me in Iran; there are considerable numbers of us contributing, and defying restrictions as much as we can. I for one refuse to apply self-censorship and insist on thinking freely, despite the headscarf. You cannot touch my mind."

Female students are highly conscious and critical of gender issues, constantly drawing comparisons between their own position in society and that of their male peers. This became apparent during the two seminars in which the author responded to enquiries about gender issues in the West, and in England particularly. These students demonstrate initiative by printing and distributing invitations for exhibitions as well as booking rooms, and securing the consent of the head of visual arts department. They robustly express their aspirations for new modes of behaviour on a daily basis through their appearance, art, and social interaction with their male friends. They remain highly critical of the government stance on laws affecting women, though they are somewhat uncertain about their future, particularly considering the recent election results. However, these women push the discussion on gender forward wherever possible. Vibrant in their strife, they are vociferous, visible, and demanding new and secular laws.

Despite their efforts, many mainstream representations of women, particularly in the Western media, tend to be decontextualized, outdated, and sadly misinformed. Despite some notable exceptions, such as Shirin Ebadi who, with her recent winning of the 2003 Nobel Prize for Peace has secured a platform to demonstrate the agency of Iranian and Muslim women, what is often missing in the deconstruction and understanding of gender issues in Iran are women's own voices. The world must be willing to hear these voices and be vigilant in recognizing their courage and struggles.

Notes

1. For another treatment of the efficacy of using ethnographic research in the study of contemporary Iran see: A. Keshavarzian, "Field Research, Research Design and the Tehran Bazaar", *ISIM Newsletter* 13 (December 2003): 51.
2. Tehran University Archives, unpublished manuscript, 2002.
3. Z. Mirhosseini, *Islam and Gender* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999).

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