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The widening Gulf

by James Panero

On the explosion of Middle Eastern investment in Western art and an exhibition of Iranian art at the Asia Society.

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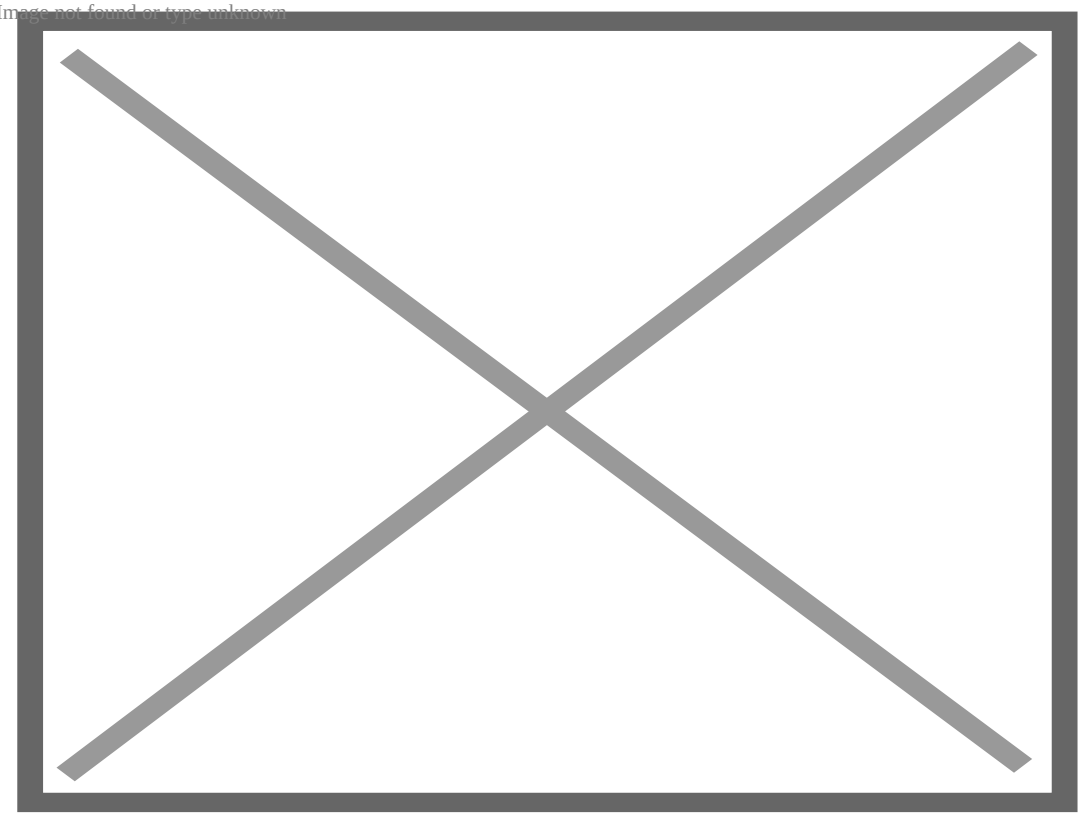

The Museum of Islamic Art; photo James Panero

A few years ago, I came as close as I'll ever get to the center of the art world. Over Dover sole at Sant Ambroeus, a restaurant on the Upper East Side, I sat across from someone who might have been mistaken for an out-of-place young grad student. While she was at Duke, my lunch companion, class of 2005, had double-majored in literature and political science. Now at Columbia, she was pursuing a masters in public administration. Casually dressed, she looked as though she were on a study break from Butler Library. Her demeanor was reserved, a little shy, and serious. "It's work all the time. Sometimes it's just very difficult, but I think it's doable," she explained. The "art world's most powerful woman," as *The Economist* has called her, had much on

her mind.

Between taking classes at the time and raising her family, Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, known as Sheikha Mayassa (a name that has a James Bond ring to it), runs the museum operations of Qatar, where she is the fourteenth child of the former Emir and the sister of the current one. “I’m still figuring out the best ways to do all this. I set up video conferences. I have my staff come to New York every month. Then I take classes,” she told me. Funded by the oil and gas riches of her principality, a thumb-shaped pile of sand that sticks into the Persian Gulf from the Arabian Peninsula, Mayassa has been leading an acquisition program that, by a wide margin, has recently spent more money on art than any other entity. “The small but energy-rich Gulf state of Qatar is the world’s biggest buyer in the art market—by value, at any rate—and is behind most of the major modern and contemporary art deals over the past six years,” *The Art Newspaper* wrote in 2011. On *ArtReview*’s 2013 “Power 100” list, which ranks “the contemporary artworld’s most powerful figures,” Mayassa is ranked number one.

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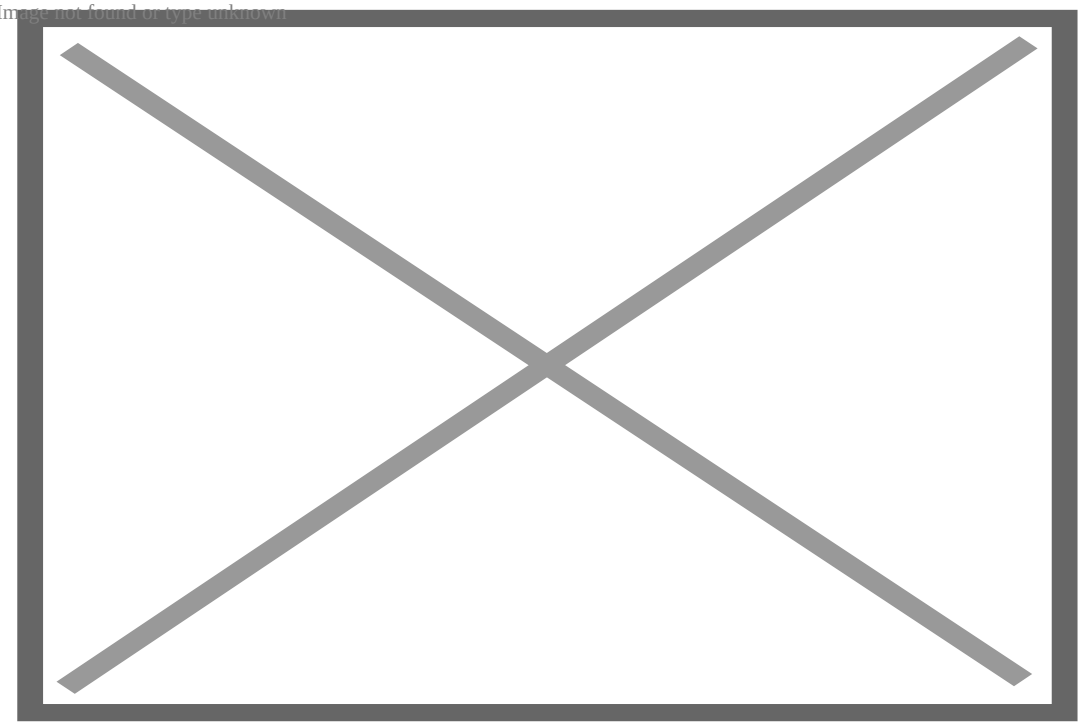

Sheikha Mayassa; Photo: Brigitte Lacombe

Qatar is estimated to have recently spent well in excess of $1 billion on Western art. These acquisitions reportedly include over $250 million for the last privately available version of Cézanne’s *Card Players*; $73 million for the “Rockefeller” Rothko, his *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)* from 1950; $63 million for Andy Warhol’s *The Men in Her Life* from 1962; $310 million for a trove of Rothkos sold by court order from the collection of J. Ezra Merkin, a conduit for Bernard Madoff; hundreds of millions for post-war art from the estate of the dealer Ileana Sonnabend; and other record-breaking prices for works by Roy Lichtenstein, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst (one piece alone cost $20 million). Mayassa is also reportedly behind the purchase of

Three Studies of Lucian Freud by Francis Bacon, sold at auction in November for a record $142 million—a claim that Acquavella Galleries (the purchasing agent) has denied.

Beyond these acquisitions, which have been funded and stored in secret by Qatar's absolutist rulers, the Qatar Museums Authority (qma) has rallied I. M. Pei from retirement to design a Museum of Islamic Art (mia) in the capital city of Doha, created a Qatari branch of New York's Tribeca Film Festival (where Mayassa secretly interned), commissioned Jean Nouvel to redesign Qatar's state museum, and sponsored international exhibitions of the contemporary artists Takashi Murakami (at Versailles) and Damien Hirst (at Tate Modern) while also importing those shows to Doha. Now on view at Doha's Al Riwaq Art Space through January 22, 2014, "Relics: Damien Hirst" is billed as "one of a series of major cultural events initiated by qma to endorse, promote and create opportunities to encourage participation in and understanding of art within the community." The exhibition outreach includes an enviable social media campaign (see www.damienhirstqatar.qa) and a life-size mockup of Hirst's shark sculpture driven around Doha by truck.

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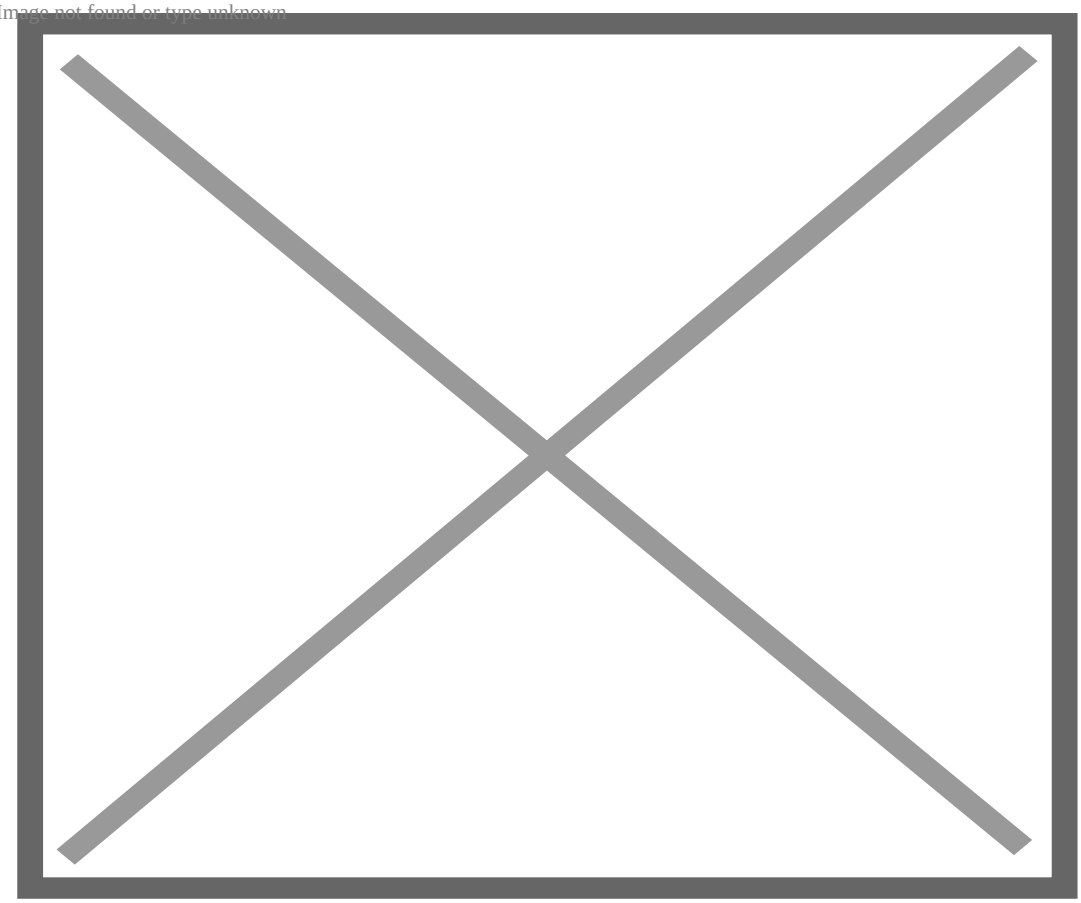

I. M. Pei at the opening of mia*; photo James Panero*

If anyone questioned the meaning of these vast expenditures, they weren't saying so when I visited Doha in late 2008 for the opening of Pei's museum, which displays the results of Qatar's vast Islamic art acquisitions. For the mia's opening party in a tented caravan outside the museum on the Doha Corniche, Yo-Yo Ma performed with his Silk Road Ensemble as waitresses in bobbed

wigs served fruit juices. The country invited the leaders of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Philippe de Montebello, Thomas Campbell, and Emily Rafferty), top-selling contemporary artists (Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons), and a member of The Rolling Stones (Ron Wood) to mingle for hours as the former Emir and his family, including Mayassa, all dressed in royal robes, looked down from a perch at the museum's entrance.

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"We're extremely supportive of what is going on here," Campbell told me during the visit. "I have some museum experience, so I thought I could be of some help," said Marie-Josée Kravis, the president of the board of the Museum of Modern Art who joined the qma board two years earlier (Dominique de Villepin, the former prime minister of France, is also a member). "We hope to create a new paradigm for museums in the twenty-first century," said Roger Mandle, the former president of the Rhode Island School of Design and the then–executive director of qma (Edward Dolman, the former chairman of Christie's, has since joined on). "It's not bedouins and oil and terrorism. It's about one of the great cultures of the world in its time," said Oliver Watson, a one-time curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum who left his post as the Keeper of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford to become the first director of the mia. "This is so inspirational!" Ron Wood declared to me inside the museum as he inspected a bronze fountain head from tenth-century Spain. "Brilliant. I'm so busy looking at the building I can't focus on the art," Damien Hirst confided in a room of brass astrolabes, the astronomical computers of medieval Islam. "This is where it all comes from, the past."

"Here in the oil and gas world, culture is not emphasized as it should be. I accepted [the commission] because of that challenge," said I. M. Pei. While costs remained a state secret, Qatar spared little expense for the construction of what will be one of Pei's final buildings, and located the museum on a new peninsula of his own design. The same limestone Pei used in his addition to the Louvre was quarried and imported to Qatar from Burgundy. Black jet mist stone was brought in from Virginia for the museum's granite base. The state then carried out much of the construction work at night, with ice poured into the mix to cure the museum's cement ceilings so they wouldn't crack in the 130-degree desert heat.

For those operating at the highest levels of our creative class, Qatar's cultural initiatives have been serious business. The outlays have been part of an even larger cultural program that also includes the opening of international campuses by six American universities in the Qatari desert—including Georgetown, Cornell, and Texas a&m—and the launch of Al Jazeera, the twenty-four-hour news channel. The country is also pursuing a sports program that may dwarf all of its other cultural endeavors as it prepares to host the fifa World Cup. Qatar will be the first Arab state to host the soccer tournament if allegations of impropriety in its selection don't derail the event.

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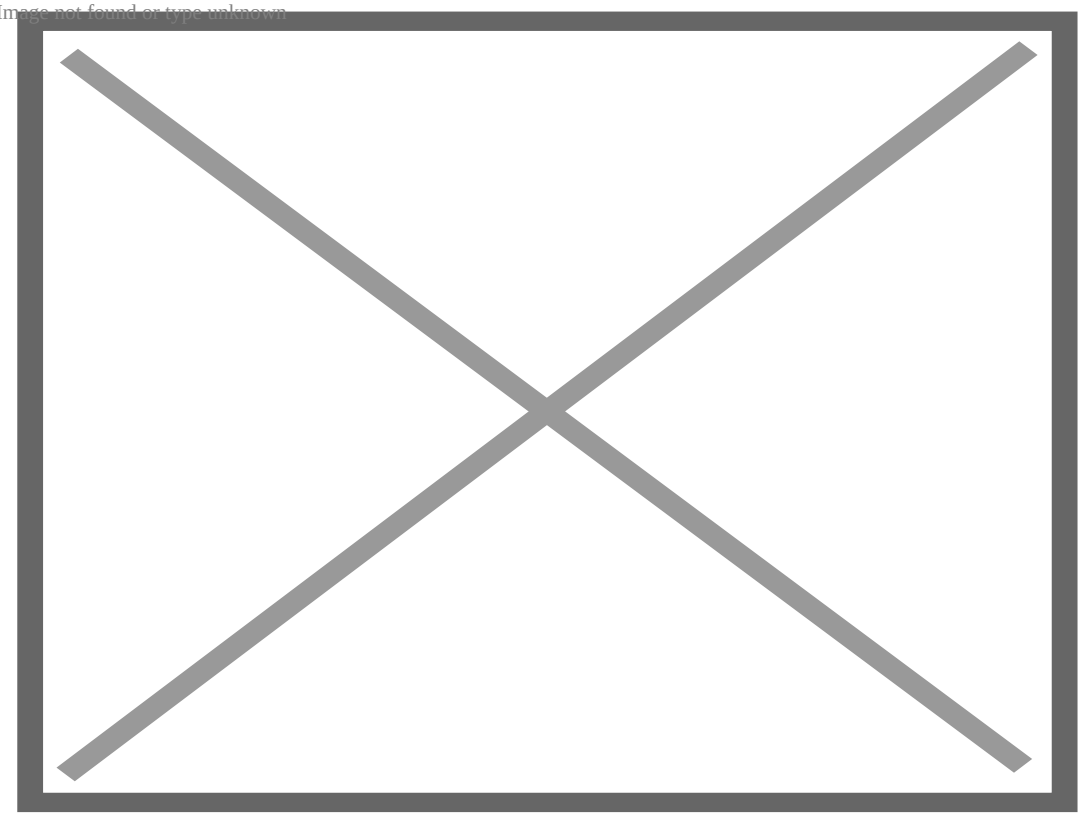

Model of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; photo James Panero

Qatar's cultural initiatives are not unlike similar programs taking place in other Gulf states. Abu Dhabi, the largest emirate in the nearby uae, is developing an entire region called Saadiyat Island into a cultural capital that will house a branch of the Louvre designed by Jean Nouvel, a branch of New York University designed by Rafael Viñoly, and a 450,0000-square-foot Guggenheim Museum—its largest anywhere—designed by Frank Gehry. What was merely a heavily bulldozed sandbar when I walked on it in 2008 is now rapidly taking shape and is scheduled to open in 2017.

The cultural partners that Qatar and the other Emirates are importing to their principalities largely claim to be there in the interest of greater global understanding. There is a "conviction that interaction with new ideas and people who are different is valuable and necessary, and a commitment to educating students who are true citizens of the world," as New York University says of its presence in Abu Dhabi. Of course, our Western elites would show little interest if these countries were still merely made up of poor fishermen and pearl divers. They are there to sell, but what precisely are these countries out to buy?

Anyone who follows the rise of the art market can safely say that global demand has moved beyond the realm of aesthetics on to other concerns. Blue-chip art has become a speculative sport, a trophy hunt, a diversified hedge, and a means for money laundering. Art now serves any number of functions that have little connection with value and connoisseurship. Since Qatar has yet to detail the extent of its own acquisition program, it is impossible to say with certainty why the country has spent billions on art, but the most likely answer is that the purchases play into a soft-power strategy developed through such partnerships as the rand-Qatar Policy Institute and the

Brookings Doha Center—which will become apparent once Qatar opens a museum for these lavish acquisitions.

One of the many policy bulletins that Qatar has published in its "National Vision 2030" plan speaks of enhancing international relations through "an intensification of cultural exchange" in order to "improve branding of the country's global image." Qatar's "image as a cultural hub," says a 2011 report, will "better position the country to assume a larger leadership role within global society."

The United States itself has a long history of converting oil revenues into art acquisition and museum construction. In the Cold War, the u.s. also effectively deployed art and culture as extensions of its own soft power. The Central Intelligence Agency fronted the Congress for Cultural Freedom, while Alfred Barr, the Rockefeller brothers, and the United States Information Agency promoted Abstract Expressionism as an alternative to Soviet Realism. These symbols of modernity became extensions of our freedoms of expression.

Such initiatives, which were considered scandalous when first revealed, now come off as sound (and bloodless) Cold War policy. It would be nice to see Qatar's cultural deployment as a similar force for liberalization, but the country's track record on human rights complicates this interpretation. Just last month, Amnesty International issued a 166-page report condemning how migrant workers in Qatar are "treated like cattle." The country's acceptance of "sponsorship" employment, a practice used throughout the region, ties laborers to their sponsor employers who have imported them into the country. This form of indentured servitude often leaves workers, from countries like Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka, exploitable and limited in their rights. The report detailed dangerous working conditions, squalid living standards, wages reduced or withheld for months, and workers forced to offer bribes in return for their passports. A video report by *The Guardian* shows workers who have been beaten by their employers and left penniless in a legal limbo without any means of returning home. At the current rate of worker mortality, one estimate says that 4,000 laborers will die in Qatar as the country makes preparations to host the 2022 World Cup.

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For a country with one of the world's highest gdps, its treatment of guest workers is only one of many alarming concerns. While Qatari women were granted the right to vote in 1999, and women can hold positions throughout the government, only about 250,000 of Qatar's 2 million residents are citizens, and the rights of citizenship are rarely extended beyond the country's indigenous tribes. Stoning and other forms of corporal punishments are still on the books. The u.s.-based Freedom House continues to label Qatar as "not free."

While Qatar can point to its creation of Al Jazeera, the Middle-Eastern news service, as evidence of relatively progressive attitudes towards the press, criticism of the state remains a high crime. In 2011, Mohammed al-Ajami, a Qatari-born literature student, was arrested for allegedly insulting the Emir and, a year later, sentenced to life imprisonment, reduced to fifteen years after appeal. One of his poems called "Tunisian Jasmine" questioned "Why, why do these regimes/ import everything from the West—/ everything but the rule of law, that is,/ and everything but freedom?" After al-Ajami's sentencing, a representative for Qatar's Human Rights Committee couldn't explain why Al Jazeera did not report the story, which had been widely covered by the BBC and other news outlets. Yet he reminded reporters that anyone reading the poem in Qatar could be sentenced to life in prison.

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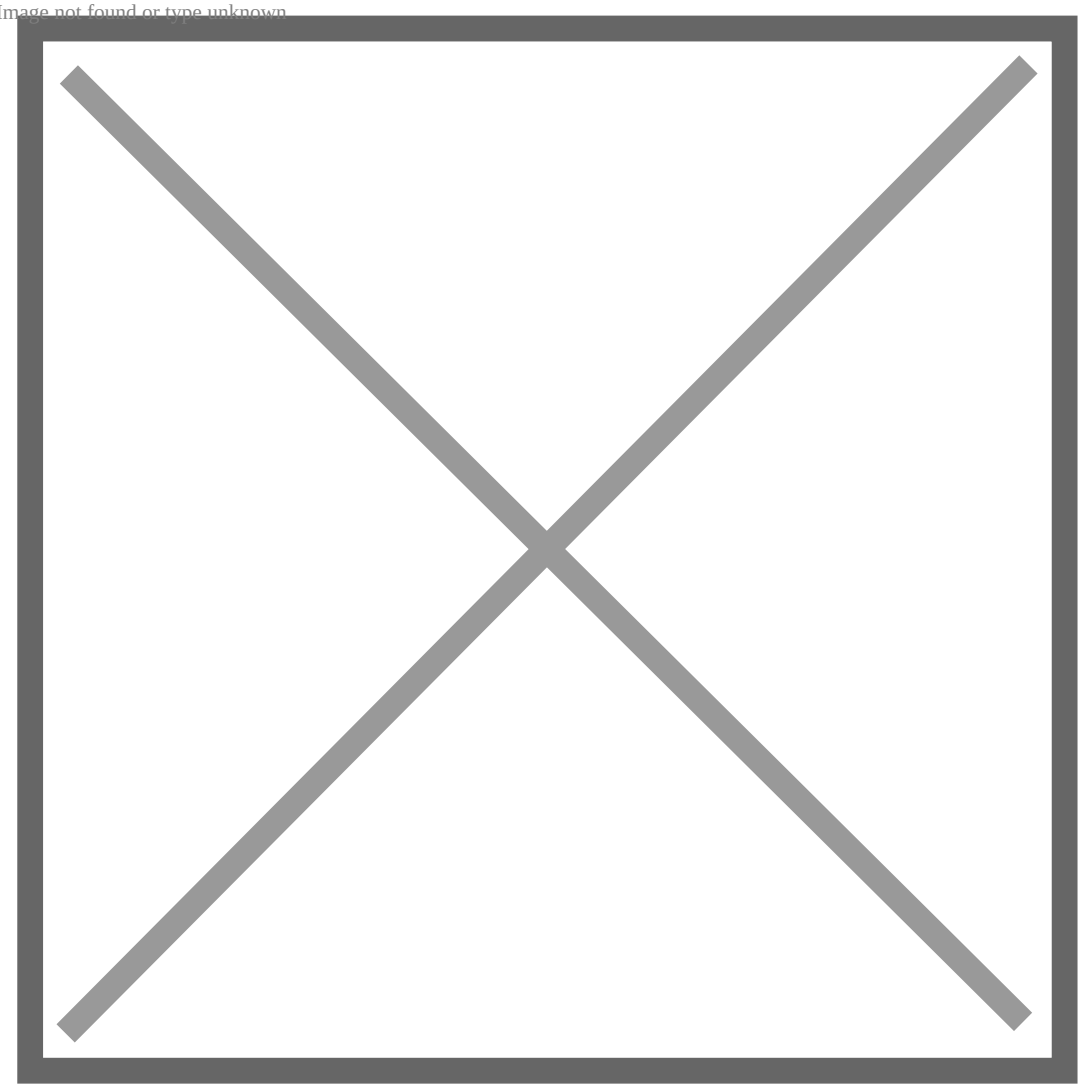

?Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian.
Untitled*, 1977. Mirror, reverse glass painting, and plaster on wood. 41 1/2 x 41 1/2 in. (105.4 x 105.4 cm). Collection of Zahra Farmanfarmaian.*

Qatar's cultural initiatives share less with the Congress for Cultural Freedom and more with modernism under the Shah. Iran's former progressive cultural program was deployed in tandem with the brutal SAVAK secret police, which at first held back but eventually propelled the

Iranian Revolution. Like Mayassa, Empress Farah Pahlavi was an outspoken supporter of modern art in Iran. A fascinating exhibition now on view at Asia Society in New York reveals the ghostly richness of that country's once-thriving modernist community. The first Tehran Biennial of contemporary art was inaugurated in 1958 and exhibited artists from Saqqakhaneh and the country's other indigenous movements. The Shiraz Arts Festival, started in 1967 and sponsored by National Iranian Radio and Television, brought together avant-garde theater and performance from around the globe—and in 1977 was denounced by the Ayatollah Khomeini from exile in Iraq.

In a fascinating interview with Asia Society published online in October, the writer Bob Colacello describes his visit to Iran in 1976 with Andy Warhol, who was there to take polaroids of the Empress for a portrait commission. Admitting that "all these artists wanted to sell stuff to the Iranians—they wanted to make money," Colacello saw a country "dealing with this balance between the West and the East and between traditional culture and modernization and globalization." He also describes the chilling memory of dining with Amir-Abbas Hoveyda, the prime minister and brother of his host, who was executed by the Ayatollah's Revolutionary Court just two years later.

In late 1977, the Empress unveiled her crowning achievement in the opening of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, featuring a permanent collection that included Monet, Van Gogh, Pissarro, Renoir, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Magritte, Miró, Braque, and one of Pollock's most important paintings, *Mural on a Red Indian Ground* (1950). Supporters of the museum had to form a human chain around the institution two years later to save it from destruction by revolutionaries, who were eventually convinced of the value of the decadent Western art inside and moved it to storage, where it remains today. The largely unseen collection is now estimated to be worth $2.5 billion.

This artifice of modernism mirrors Qatar's other contradictory diplomatic positions.

On the one hand, Qatar's art initiatives can be seen as a modernizing force, one that could liberalize the tribal attitudes of the country's native population and pave the way for further political reform. On the other hand, contemporary art may merely serve as a cover for further repressive policies. This artifice of modernism mirrors Qatar's other contradictory diplomatic positions. An ally to the United States and host of u.s. Central Command, Qatar nevertheless reportedly helped Khalid Sheikh Mohammed escape u.s. capture in the 1990s, may have been paying protection money to al Qaeda, and is currently arming radical Syrian rebels and offering safe haven to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

The terrible history of Iran demonstrates what can happen when a modernist culture merely overlays a repressive regime. In such circumstances, artists and organizations might profit by spreading modernity, but they are also abetting a compromised state. The two go hand in hand,

liberalizing on the one and oppressing on the other. The art, meanwhile, continues its own transformation, evolving from images of Provençal peasant life and visions of abstract thought into symbols of autocratic power. Should a state like Qatar ever collapse, the results would leave a hole not only in the art market but in the culture of art itself. In the meantime, *épater la bourgeoisie* has become state policy in the modernizing capital of Doha, while *épater l'Emir* remains a capital offense.

James Panero is the Executive Editor of *The New Criterion*.

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