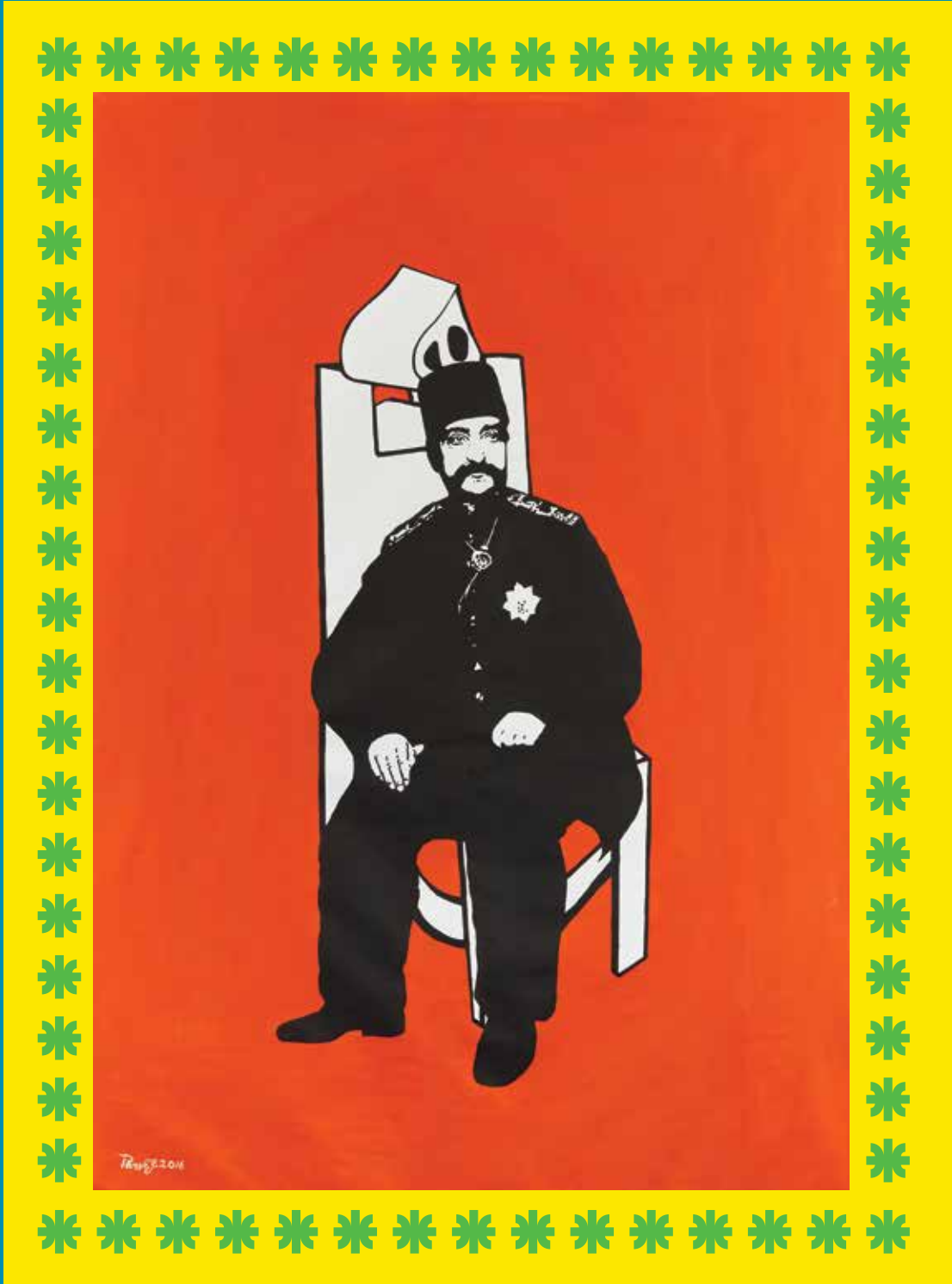




Exclusive

TANAVOLI AND 50 YEARS OF POP ART



Universal Icons

Parviz Tanavoli

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Curated by:
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تلفن: ۰۲۱۲۶۶۰۱۰۴۹ | فکس: ۰۲۱۲۶۶۰۱۲۴۷

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۳۱ اردیبهشت تا ۲۸ خرداد ۱۳۹۵ | 20 May - 17 June 2016

Designed by: **STUDIO TEHRAN**



"It is going to be difficult to take in some of the items in the current Tanavoli exhibition at the Borghese if you have not already made up your mind about 'Pop Art', i.e., if you have not made up your mind to like 'Pop Art'. Not that Parviz Tanavoli is a true-blooded 'popper', but he seems to have much in common with them."

Karim Emami¹

True-Blooded Pop: The History of Pop in Iran

Yashar Samimi Mofakham

A statement from "The EY Exhibition: The World Goes Pop"² held at London's Tate Modern in 2015 declares, "Pop Art was part of the challenge to the old order that helped shape the modern world."³ This exhibition included works by sixty-four artists from twenty-eight countries around the world. Parviz Tanavoli was the only artist from the Middle East, and was recognized as one of the forerunners of Pop Art – outside of Britain and the United States. The works by Tanavoli exhibited at the Tate were from the Museum's permanent collection, created in Iran between the years 1964 and 1974. Tanavoli used a variety of material in these works, including rugs, glass, tin, plastic, neon, and paint. Fifty years after Tanavoli's first Pop Art exhibition, the show at Tate introduced western viewers to one of the forerunners of Pop

1- Taken from Karim Emami's article "Tanavoli Turns 'Popper'", printed in the English version of Keyhan Magazine on November 8th, 1965 and translated by Mehran Mohajer. It is a collection of critical articles by Karim Emami from the 1960s printed in the English version of Keyhan Magazine. The quote for this catalogue is used with the permission of Goli Emami (the series editor).

2- This exhibition ran from September 2015 until January 2016.

3- An indirect quote by Martin Cook.

Art, who is the first Pop artist of Iran and the region. In fifty years of work Tanavoli has proved that Pop Art is not a western phenomenon. It is an art that belongs to all peoples of the world, a bold, direct language without geographical borders. It is a language of art against cautiousness, and understandable by all. It is by the people, for the people.

Parviz Tanavoli has played a key role in the art and culture of Iran as well as the Middle East over the past six decades. This role is not limited to his creations as an artist, but to the range and variety of his activities in different areas of the arts, particularly the cultural inheritance of Iranians. He is a sculptor, painter, print-maker, author, researcher and art historian, as well as a collector and patron of Iranian modern and contemporary art.⁴

His research and collections focus on local, tribal, and folk arts of Iran. He has written more than twenty books on subjects such as, talismans, locks, scales and weights, kohl containers, tombstones, as well as many books on hand-woven fabrics, tribal and village kilims and rugs, focusing on the historic-cultural importance of these items for the first time. The range of these collections clearly shows the depth of Tanavoli's knowledge, and his interest in the creations and beliefs of common people.⁵ He lives surrounded by folk art and the effect of this is clearly visible in his art.

At a time when referring to the masses, their way of speech and their beliefs was looked down upon by intellectuals, Parviz Tanavoli was inspired by folk art and carved common sayings on his sculptures. He writes, "Discovering Tehran's south-side in 1957 was like discovering a gold mine for me." In that year he discovered street vendors, tinkerers, and spell writers. Metal shops, pottery studios, and the company of industrial workers became part of his routine for many years.⁶ His deep belief in this unknown part of Iran's art and culture convinced him to remain on course. Today after many decades, he remains a proponent of Iranian contemporary art, as well as forgotten folk arts and narratives, introducing these arts to the people of his country and around the world.

Parviz Tanavoli held an exhibition at Borghese Gallery in 1965. The work presented at this exhibition was difficult to understand for his contemporary critics and fellow artists, because they were

4- Eisler, Maryam. *Art & Patronage: The Middle East*. Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2010

5- *About Farangi Women*, a collection of prints by Parviz Tanavoli and the book "European Women in Persian Houses", written by Yashar Samimi Mofakham for the British Museum in 2015.

6- *Atelier Kaboud*, written by Parviz Tanavoli. First printed in 2005.

neither sculptures nor paintings. These were objects glued onto the canvas, or sculptures made not from marble and bronze, but from plastic, lamps, neon, painted wood, and tin sheets. Before this Tanavoli had shown his mastery in the creation of high-quality bronze sculptures, but the exhibition at the Borghese exasperated his fans and critics alike. The work presented at this exhibition angered the people and the gallery's French owner closed down the exhibit after only three days. This exhibition destroyed the gallery owner's reputation and sent away the gallery's clientele forever.⁷ Fifty years ago the exhibition "Farhad Whoever He Was, Was a Man" set the world of art in Iran on fire. Before that most artists were still struggling between the romantic, naturalistic art of Kamal-ol-Molk's School and Modern Western art with its own particular visuals.

That exhibition, which after fifty years is still the most Pop exhibition in the history of Iranian art, was hesitantly titled 'Pop Art' at the time. In those years Pop Art was known as American Pop, and any work similar to Warhol and Lichtenstein's art would be labeled Pop. A can of Campbell soup could be considered Pop Art, but it was doubtful if a watering ewer (*aftabeh*)⁸ could be considered art. Collages made from newspapers and comic strips were considered art, but gluing pieces of carpet and pumpkin seeds on a canvas wasn't taken seriously.

Tanavoli understood the importance of American art as well as what people created in their daily lives. In one of the first statements written about Pop Art, which many consider the Pop manifesto Richard Hamilton⁹ states, "Pop Art is: popular, transient, expendable, low-cost, mass-produced, young, witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, and Big Business."¹⁰

Tanavoli established Iranian Pop Art with a similar definition in 1965. He showed that Iranian Pop Art is popular, narrative, poetic, critical, bold, exciting, and confusing, but it is rooted in idioms, tales, beliefs, and folk creations. It is limitlessly Iranian without resorting to usual techniques for announcing its Iranian identity. At that time there were doubts about his work being Pop, and furthermore, in their being 'art'. But with the passage of time, today that exhibition is considered the first spark of Pop, the most important Pop statement, and the most important work of Pop Art in the past five decades in Iran and the region. Tanavoli started

7- *ibid.*

8- Used to wash oneself after using the toilet.

9- Richard William Hamilton (1922-2011) one of the founders of Pop Art.

10- Letter to Alison and Peter Smithson written on January 16th 1957.

Iranian Pop Art inspired by folk art in 1965, and this movement continues up to this day. In my opinion Tanavoli is a true-blooded 'Popper', even if he dislikes being called purely a Pop artist. The entire oeuvre of his work, from sculpture to painting, assemblages to prints, as well as his research, is tied to Pop Art.

"Universal Icons" is the first exhibition of this type focused on Tanavoli's work of Pop Art in the past fifty years. This exhibition is in fact the fiftieth anniversary of Iranian Pop Art. It is as if Tanavoli's connection to Pop Art which he helped establish, and its manifesto in the form of "Farhad Whoever He Was, Was a Man", has never been severed.

This time however Tanavoli's Pop is of a different material. This time it includes the "Heech" (Nothingness). The same "Heech" that was presented for the first time at Borghese Gallery to Iran's art society - and later the world - along with the introduction of Pop Art. That exhibition included a canvas with a copper window grabbed by two needy hands, above which the word "Heech" was written in neon light.

"If one of my works can be considered popular, it is "Heech". People liked my "Heech" works and easily related to them."¹¹

In his book "Atelier Kaboud" Tanavoli writes, "Since ordinary people couldn't afford my bronze "Heech"es, I thought of making an abundance of less expensive "Heech"es." He prepared the molds and looked forward to selling plastic "Heech"es in stores and supermarkets, and even considered creating a "Heech-making" factory to import them all over the world. This idea and its implementation must be considered one of the most conceptual in the history of contemporary art. "Heech" has continued to grow alongside Tanavoli. Today it is considered his most renowned work, and the most prominent and universal work in the history of Iranian sculpture.

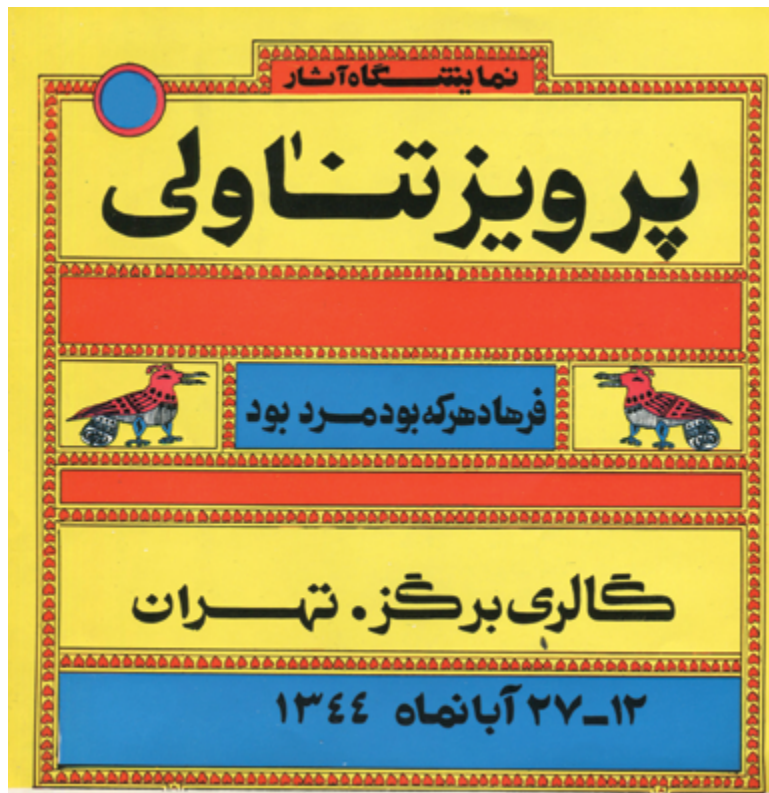
In "Universal Icons" Parviz Tanavoli juxtaposes some of the world's best-known icons with his "Heech". Here, these characters become iconic due to the significance of Tanavoli's "Heech". They stand, sit, embrace, and play with "Heech", and together become "Heech" despite their renown.

Pop is about things that become empty of meaning at the apex of their renown. It isn't important if it is a can of soup, the Queen of England's crown, Mao, Mick Jagger, Marilyn Monroe, or Naser-al-Din Shah Qajar. Pop is a celebration of fame and a funeral for

demise. In these works Tanavoli's "Heech" is beautiful and poetic, and its bold colors refer to its period of stardom. Juxtaposing a "Heech" – this most famous and important word in contemporary art – next to famous politicians, artists, philosophers, etc., bitterly exclaims, "Oh you ignorant, everything is formed as nothingness (Heech)/this entire sphere is based on nothingness".¹²

The exhibition "Universal Icons" celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of Pop Art in Iran as well as Iranian Pop Art in the world, which was established by Parviz Tanavoli. It also happens to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Tanavoli's "Heech" sculpture.

This exhibition is of historic significance, and one of the most important records of the history of Iranian contemporary art. What was exhibited in 2015 at London's Tate Modern is now completed and presented to Iranian viewers for the first time. It is undoubtedly an event that will be remembered with pride in years to come.



Exhibition Catalogue, Borghese Gallery | Design: Parviz Tanavoli | 1965

12- Omar Khayyam, Persian poet of the 11th century CE.



Heech | Plexiglass, copper, plaster, wood and oil paint | 82×80 cm cm | 1964 | Manijeh Collection



2. Winston Churchill | Acrylic on Canvas | 150×120 cm cm | 2016



1. Ahmad Shah | Acrylic on Canvas | 130×100 cm | 2016



4. Marilyn Monroe | Acrylic on Canvas | 150x120 cm | 2016



3. Frida Kahlo | Acrylic on Canvas | 150x120 cm | 2016



6. Queen Victoria | Acrylic on Canvas | 160x110 cm | 2016



5. Nassereddin Shah | Acrylic on Canvas | 160x110 cm | 2016



7/7

8. Frank Sinatra | Acrylic on Canvas | 150x120 cm | 2016



7. Ronald Reagan | Acrylic on Canvas | 130x100 cm | 2016

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