This article concerns both the major discourses on art and artistic production in Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution; its aim is to define the emergence of neotraditionalism in the art of the 1990s. To do this, I will examine the major artistic trends and discourses within the socio-cultural context of postrevolutionary Iran, including art exhibitions held in the country. I will consider the impact of the Islamic Revolution on the formation of the discourse of *muta‘ahhid* (“committed,” i.e., revolutionary) art and will analyze the intellectual and governmental discourses and their role in the development of new postrevolutionary artistic trends, among which I will emphasize neotraditionalism. Throughout this discussion, I will explore the revival of the intellectual and artistic preoccupations of the prerevolutionary generation, mainly from the 1960s, and will examine the relationship between their works and those of particular neotraditionalist artists active in the 1990s.

As Peter Chelkowski remarks, “The Revolution in Iran was an event of universal significance in the modern history of the Middle East”; it was not just a backward-looking fundamentalist phenomenon but also a modern one, yet one “whose message was steeped in localized imagery demanding an idealized return to the past.” Therefore, it is not surprising that a synthesis of the traditional and the modern inherent in the Revolution gradually emerged in Iranian culture and in the art that we call neotraditionalism.

In accord with revolutionary aspirations, certain profound transformations occurred in various domains of Iranian life, politics, and culture, and these had a marked effect on the formation of Iranian postrevolutionary art. “Modernism,” transferred to a sort of art based on Islamic cultural traditions, was initially popular among the masses who were the main supporters of the Revolution. The 1979 event, however, brought to a sudden end the official artistic policies of the previous regime, which had been based on the promotion of modernism on the one hand and of nationalism on the other. Both of these were challenged by the Revolution as elements of Pahlavi (1925–79) policy. As a result, as noted by Ruyin Pakbaz, a prominent Iranian art critic and historian,

...with the denial of the existence and function of the official art pursued under Mohammad Reza Shah, many artistic administrators and a number of artists left the scene. A young, inexperienced force came to the fore and, in a hasty and radical reaction, rejected all that had been done by the previous generation of artists.

The most problematic issue for artists in the first years after the Revolution was their suddenly being prevented from interacting with the world outside Iran: they were unable to show their works to an international audience or participate in the global discourse that was modern art. Nevertheless, a few of the most established artists, as well as a significant number of dynamic young ones, chose to stay in Iran. The activity of the prerevolutionary artists of this group, however, was not legitimized in the official coteries until the early nineties. In that milieu, anything that could be associated with a monarchical system was condemned. Haggai Ram argues that: “…revolutions are […]—perhaps principally—struggles over memory,” that is, they wage war upon memories of the old order. In the Iranian Revolution, as Ram maintains, “the commitment to break with the past [the monarchical system] provided a foundation upon which to build a new society.” Accordingly, the revolutionaries “set out to eradicate the hegemonic historical narrative of the Pahlavi monarchy by creating a counter-historical narrative that was ideally structured to fit the new teleology of the Revolution.”

Initially, the anti-Western nature of the Revolution and the slogan of political and cultural independence also fostered a clash with and halt to the growth and promotion of modern art in Iran. In the years following the Revolution, a new definition of “modernism” was suggested, one that mainly implied a kind of Western product consisting of different artistic forms, styles, and movements, from Impressionism to...
Abstraction. Common to all of these, it was believed, was their contrast with a kind of realistic and representational demotic art that could convey meaning to the public. “Modern” art was not approved in official circles; rather it was regarded negatively because it lacked any political, religious, social, or ethical message to “direct” the viewer. In those early years after the Revolution, not only was modern art not supported by the government and other sectors including ministries, banks, corporations, and the press (who had favored it during the prerevolutionary period), it was met with indifference or even active opposition. In its place, art officials eagerly proposed the creation of a kind of Irano-Islamic art that would possess its own characteristics distinct from those of Western art and that would convey traditional cultural values. Basically however, Islamic and revolutionary values remained largely uncodified during the transition period and were subject to local or expedient interpretations, and they did not specify any theoretical or practical principles or patterns for visual art. This resulted in a situation that was, at best, uncertain for Iranian painting during the late 1970s, throughout the 1980s, and into the early 1990s. When one looks at the formal exhibitions held in the period after the Revolution, even the First Iranian Painting Biennial in 1991, one can readily observe this uncertainty.

The most significant artistic shift just after the Revolution focused attention on traditional Islamic arts and on the production of a particular kind of popular painting: the term hunar-i mardumí (demotic/collective art) in revolutionary terminology referred to realist (and sometimes expressionistic) art that dealt mainly with political and revolutionary subjects in which lower-class and ordinary people played the main role (figs. 2–4). The principle of hunar-i mardumí lay in the belief that art was a tool for propaganda, about which Chelkowski writes:

A particular delivery of the rhetorical images of convictions—the art of persuasion, the ability to move the individuals in a mass—is designed to make legitimate claims on political obedience, on measures of mass mobilization. To the degree that such rhetoricals [sic] of images are rooted in deep and surviving cultural paradigms, they expose a wide angle of vision on the dominant moral matters of a political culture. The purpose, whether or not self-conscious, of aesthetics in any art of persuasion is to transform the experience of rhyme and reason, shape and beauty, into elements of mobilizing conviction.9

This kind of art was approved, encouraged, and supported by the artistic section of the new revolutionary government, especially in the first decade after the Revolution.10 In 1983, the Minister of Islamic Guidance,11 Sayyid Mohammad Khatami, announced:

We ought to introduce art as one of the important branches of human culture and history, and as a way to conceive of and enhance the pious and grand human spiritual character for people, who are the symbols and embodiments of those values, and whose characters are mixed with the Islamic Revolution’s values and aspirations. [Exposing art] in any other way would be a disloyalty to both art and human beings …12

The idea that modern art could not connect with ordinary people’s beliefs seemed to be the other main
Fig. 2. Hossein Khosrowjerdi, *Hayyi ‘ala ‘lfalah* (Come to salvation [part of the call to prayer]), 1977. Oil on canvas, 200 x 500 cm. Artistic Center of Islamic Propaganda Organization. (Photo: courtesy of the Center)

Fig. 3. Kazem Chalipa, *Guards of the Anemone Field*, 1980. Oil on canvas. Artistic Center of Islamic Propaganda Organization. (Photo: courtesy of the Center)

Fig. 4. Kazem Chalipa, *Rūz-i buzurg* (The Great Day), 1984. Oil on canvas, 160 x 115 cm. Artistic Center of Islamic Propaganda Organization. (Photo: courtesy of the Center)
Fig. 5. Nasser Palangi, Kūch (Migration), 1980–82. Oil on canvas. Artistic Center of Islamic Propaganda Organization. (Photo: courtesy of the Center)

Fig. 6. Habibollah Sadeghi, Tashyª{-i qulªb (Funeral of Hearts), 1983. Oil on canvas, 112 x 170 cm. Artistic Center of Islamic Propaganda Organization. (Photo: courtesy of the Center)
reason for ignoring any form of it. It was argued that modern Iranian painting, despite its expanding growth in the 1960s and 1970s, had lost the public. The postrevolutionaries also criticized the situation of Iranian artists and intellectuals working simply for themselves, and they found fault with prerevolutionary artists because of their preference for formalism over content and meaning in their works. One of the theoreticians of the postrevolutionary group of “committed” artists, Abdolmajid Hosseini-Rad, claims:

During the years before the Revolution, formalism was the dominant aspect of Iranian painting, attracting almost all the attention of modernist painters. In those days formalism was so dominant that even the search for a new visual language complying with national and local demands was entirely affected by a formalistic outlook.

Although revolutionary art first condemned or repudiated all kinds of prerevolutionary art, the works of artists after the Revolution, when carefully considered, show some resemblance to the 1960s works by artists of the Saqqā-khāna movement, at least in so far as they used popular religious pictorial elements and motifs even in formalist constructions. These had already appeared in the early Saqqā-khāna-period (1962–64) works by the movement’s main founders. In the various forms of revolutionary art, especially posters, stamps, and murals, calligraphic forms and Shiite iconography were dominant features, mixed with figuration and a promotive quality (figs. 1 and 2) inspired by other twentieth-century revolutionary art, especially that from the Soviet Union, Mexico, and Cuba. Despite the clear and fundamental difference between the Islamic Revolution of Iran and other major revolutions of the twentieth century—the others future-oriented and based mainly on socialist beliefs and aspirations, and the Islamic Revolution focused on the Islamic past in order to redefine the future—the form of artistic production, based on revolutionary and propagandist ideas, was similar. In their use of symbolic elements, the Iranian artists tried to reflect such concepts as the Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom, and gnosticism by a form of realist expression that was a familiar language in other revolutionary art. Social commitment and storytelling that conveyed a religious or political message were among the most important features of these works and further increased their popularity and acceptance among the masses, since they were simple and understandable in both form and execution (figs. 1–6).

In terms of theory, however, the frequent use of such pompous expressions as “spiritual identity” and “elevation of forms” for Iran’s postrevolutionary art, along with the absence of principles and accurate methods for its analysis, only intensified problems of its definition. For example, a message that Ayatollah Khomeini addressed to artists in September 1988 urged that revolutionary art be conceived as “the gnostic challenge,” “the rejection of uncommitted art and art for art’s sake,” “the revolt against violence,” “the illustration of martyrdom,” and the “dedication to Islamic values.”

In what proved to be one of the major official postrevolutionary exhibitions, held in 1983 at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the aim of the exhibition was explained as follows:

We should esteem the impulse to organize these exhibitions as an earnest and meaningful attempt, because the main reason for holding them is clearly to enshrine the spiritual as well as the committed content, the sincere and eloquent language of artists. [...] The dominant atmosphere of the works shows a united message of artists who have created their art with sincerity, faith, and seriousness in accordance with principles of the Islamic Revolution, posing the messages of the Revolution and, more important, creating a committed, eloquent art. We should believe that after an interval of doldrums in the formation of postrevolutionary art, especially visual art, caused by the initial conflicts of the Revolution, we can now see in these exhibitions the flowering and growth of talent; [these are] artists whose art does not originate in dilettantism but is full of message, faith, and sincerity.

This situation continued and was even exaggerated during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88): wall painting, panel drawing, and poster design on epic, religious, and political themes flourished. Furthermore, “popular beliefs and rituals were converted into stamps, banknotes, and chewing gum wrappers, and directed towards mass mobilization for the Revolution and war.” The eight-year war with Iraq was to create crucial problems in Iran for years, but it led to an increasing sense of nationalism throughout the country. Chelkowski writes of “the Museum of Furious Art” that is the Iran of the 1980s, a nation engaged in revolution and war, relentlessly remaking itself in images and forms, shapes and colors, frames of angers and anxieties. This situation lasted throughout the
1980s, although things began to change after the end of the war: in 1988 the production of art as propaganda significantly diminished. From the end of the 1980s and increasingly during the 1990s, a neotraditionalism started to develop among artists. The neotraditionalist artists were committed to creating a synthesis, both conceptual and stylistic, of indigenous and historical art forms and contemporary art. One can find in their works a quest for a mode of modern artistic expression that might achieve an equilibrium between the historical past and modernism.

By the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the Iranian artistic scene seemingly required a comprehensive exhibition in which various postrevolutionary artistic activities and tendencies would be aired. After the destruction of the war, Iranian society had begun reconstruction in different domains, including sociocultural and economic life. During the period after the Revolution, the population had greatly increased, and now consisted mostly of young people, a large number of whom gravitated towards the different arts, especially visual art. At the same time, a new middle-class and technically educated stratum of the Iranian population was being formed, and a large number of the younger members of this class became enthusiastically involved in art. Hence, the number of artists, art lovers, and applicants to study or practice art, according to a reliable estimate, increased tenfold over what it had been in the 1970s. By the end of the 1980s, private galleries that had hitherto been inactive or closed were reactivated, while many new ones were opened, and they again began to exhibit non-political and non-propagandizing art.

Nevertheless, the constant presence of government in directing art in modern Iran should not be ignored. Both before and after the Revolution the governmental cultural sections played a significant role in creating a kind of official art led and supported by state cultural policies. Despite the fact that, in the initial postrevolutionary years, different exhibitions—held in particular on anniversaries of the Islamic Revolution—had been mounted in various public spaces, especially the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, these were affected by the politicized and propagandizing atmosphere dominant at the time. The central core of these
Discourses on Postrevolutionary Iranian Art

Fig. 9. Mostafa Darreh-Baghi, Panâh (Refuge), 1993. Watercolor on paper, 55 x 50 cm. (After Naqqâshi mu‘âsîr-i Iran, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 10. Khosrow Khosravi, Gul‘uğîrî zi gulfstân-i jahân mā râbas (A Beauty from the Rosegardens of This World is Enough for Us), 1993. Oil on canvas, 210 x 150 cm. (After Naqqâshi-i mu‘âsîr-i Iran, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Exhibitions comprised the works—both paintings and posters—of revolutionary or “committed” artists, and a range of traditional arts including calligraphy and miniature painting (nigârgâri).27

Following several years of haphazard activity, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art began organizing regular biennials and triennials, among which the painting biennials were the largest and seemingly the most controversial.28 The First Iranian Painting Biennial opened in the autumn of 1991, twelve years after the victory of the Revolution. (Before that exhibition, as mentioned above, both the Museum of Contemporary Art and other public artistic centers29 had held many exhibitions on various occasions; these did not affect contemporary Iranian art, however—largely because of their lack of organization and comprehensiveness.)30 The catalogue of the First Iranian Painting Biennial announced a clear and very ambitious goal: the exhibition, organized by the Artistic Deputy of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, was intended to “improve the art of painting in both quantity and quality, establish a true atmosphere of competition among artists, and explore and support young talent.”31

Although the 1991 biennial was in actuality the sixth, since there had been five others held in Tehran before the Revolution,32 the organizers justified its title with the logic that

...due to deep transformations in different aspects of Iranian life, including politics, society, and culture, this Biennial, which also was a product of the postrevolutionary period, could not have many affiliations with those of prerevolutionary ones! And since it was the first official comprehensive exhibition in the period after the Revolution, it had to be called “The First Iranian Painting Biennial.”33

In the words of the manifesto presented at the First Biennial:
Fig. 11. Hamid Reza Noori Seresht, Āvāz-i par-i fibrā’īl (Song of Gabriel’s Wing), 1995. Mixed media on canvas, 110 x 90 cm. (After Naqqāsh-i mu’āsir-i Šīrāz, barguzītā’ī az āšā-i sivvūnī nimāyishgāh-i du-sālāna-i naqqāsh-i Šīrāz = Iran Contemporary Painting, A Selection of Works from the Third Iranian Painting Biennial [Tehran, 1376/1997], published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 12. Abdolhamid Ghadirian, Gul-i āghāz (Creation Flower), 1999. Oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. (After Ru’yā-yi firshītāgūn: Bayān-i tāmjīl dar naqqāshī-ī nau-girā-ī Šīrāz = The Dream of Angels: Symbolic Expression in Iranian Modernist Painting [Tehran 1379/2000], published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 13. Sharareh Mahdood, Untitled, 1995. Acrylic and gouache on canvas, 80 x 60 cm. (After Naqqāsh-i mu’āsir-i Šīrāz, barguzītā’ī az āšā-i sivvūnī nimāyishgāh-i du-sālāna-i naqqāshī-ī Šīrāz, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 14. Vali Fattahzadeh, Attack, 1993. Oil on canvas, 74 x 102 cm. (After Naqqāsh-i mu’āsir-i Šīrāz, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)
Fig. 15. Alireza Mahram-Nia, Rāḥita-i Rabbānī (Divine Connection), 1995. Mixed media on canvas, 50 x 60 cm. (After Naqqāsh-i muʿāṣrī-ī Irān, barguzādaʾ az āṣār-ī sīvūmīn nimāyishgāh-i du-sālāna-ī naqqāshī-ī Irān, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 16. Mehrnaz Abdolhossein-Zadeh, Untitled, 1995. Mixed media, 50 x 70 cm. (After Naqqāshī-ī muʿāṣrī-ī Irān, barguzādaʾ az āṣār-ī sīvūmīn nimāyishgāh-i du-sālāna-ī naqqāshī-ī Irān, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Following the establishment of the Islamic Republic, there has been a development in the art of painting as well. Influenced by the social and political developments of their society today, the vanguard of “committed” and independent artists are determined to regain the religious and national identity that the walls of imitation have destroyed, letting the unpolluted, pure, independent, and dynamic atmosphere dynamize the talents of the young.34

A survey of the paintings shown in this biennial reveals that a small section of the exhibition was devoted to the works of the muta‘āḥhid artists. The major part of the exhibition, however, consisted of works showing a tendency to use pre-Islamic Persian forms, traditional Islamic motifs, and elements of folkloristic art as references (figs. 9–11 and 15–18). Some works sought to achieve an artistic identity by the inclusion of musical instruments, scenes of Sufi dancing, details of traditional architecture, and so on (figs. 7, 8, 10, 11),35 features now apparent in the works of many young artists. Apparent from prize-winning works in the biennial is that a major criterion of their selection was their resemblance—formal as well as aesthetic—to so-called Irano-Islamic art, including their use of decorative motifs and calligraphy, their representation of religious traditions and rituals,36 and so on.37 The First Biennial also featured the works of different traditional genres, including Qahva-khāna (coffeehouse) and miniature painting. Among others, works of some prominent Naqqāsh-khātt (calligraphy-based) artists were also exhibited.38

Put forward as one of the key issues of the First Biennial was the question of cultural identity.39 As the introduction to the Biennial catalogue put it:

Revision of values and authenticities is neither an artistic and mental reaction nor a weakness regarding modernism. Rather it is a strong attempt to achieve an artistic identity that is appropriate and understood based on visual and subjective frameworks originating from our […] cultural authenticity. […] With reliance on the specificity of Iranian revolutionary society, and with the purpose of supporting a dynamic and valuable pattern, the Center of Plastic Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance employs all its ability to amplify the growing and comprehensive “Art of the Islamic Revolution.”40

(“Valuable pattern” referred to the part of the biennial entitled “Palestine,” as if the organizers still needed a political ingredient to justify the component of...
the exhibition that was independent and non-political.41

During the 1991 biennial, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art hosted a conference entitled “The First Conference of Iranian Plastic Arts,” in which there were colloquia, debates, and lectures by Iranian artists and art scholars. As is suggested by the title of the conference proceedings, Huviyyat-i farhangi va hunarti (Cultural and Artistic Identity), the main issue considered was national identity in art and how it could be preserved.42 The introduction to the publication frames the issues thus:

What response have we contrived against the mighty storm of recent centuries that has blown from the West and has assumed different shape and emphasis in every period? Is there any way to preserve our culture and art [from that storm]? What is the responsibility of the young generation of revolutionary artists? These questions and tens of similar questions were the motivations for holding this Conference.43

Considered carefully, the contents of the debates and arguments of the conference bear a close resemblance to the major artistic and intellectual preoccupations in the period before the Revolution, in particular the 1960s. Cultural and artistic identity were topics that had already been propounded then, but that now showed new emphasis on the revolutionary aspect of Iranian culture and on Islam as an integral part of that culture. Generally speaking, however, the new discourse did not essentially differ from what had been advocated before the Revolution, although the main emphasis now was on the content of traditional values.

In the 1960s the issue of cultural and artistic identity had been addressed not only by officials of the cultural establishment but also by innovative artists. In 1991, about thirteen years after the Islamic Revolution, the subject of the identity crisis in Iranian art had again emerged, this time primarily emphasized by the officials,44 who seem to have hoped that the First Biennial could represent in both form and content a kind of new national or Islamic art, or a so-called independent art (which no one really believed could be achieved).

The Second Iranian Painting Biennial, in 1993, had some of the same atmosphere, but with more flexibility: this time there was no particular restriction in subject matter or content of the exhibition. Although the selection criteria as stated bore similarities to those of the previous biennial and earlier exhibitions,45 it was clear that the nature of Iranian painting was now tending towards modernism, the dominant approach towards which was the attempted synthesis of traditional and modern known as neotraditionalism. In this Second Biennial, most of the trends in contemporary Iranian painting were represented, with the exception of miniature painting, which as of 1993 was given separate biennials.

Organizers of the Second Biennial again suggested as a solution to the artistic identity crisis that more attention be directed to national and Islamic arts, although no one now proposed a “national school of art.”46 As one member of the selection panel suggested, “The essence of new thought exists in our national and Islamic art, but it has covered itself over. We must find it and expand it into other artistic and cultural domains.”47 Since it was difficult to find any comprehensive tendency in the works exhibited in the first two biennials, the crisis of artistic identity was still the main topic for debate in the Second Conference of Plastic Arts, held during the 1993 biennial. One of the proposed solutions was that art works refer to the “principal structures” of past Iranian art—a reference that was not to be formal, however, but that should instead concern the content and meaning of the traditional arts. At this second conference, Mohammad Ali Rajabi, an artist and art critic, suggested,

We face various discourses in our country, such as identity, cultural aggression, and so on, which are [in fact] unprecedented and different from what we have previously encountered. The point we must be aware of is that we should not deal with [those discourses] superficially. In this year’s biennial, different groups [of artists] have tried to display [a sense of] identity in their works. Certainly, their attempt should be appreciated. We also saw a group whose motto was: “If we use colors such as lapis lazuli and gold, or make our work flat [omitting perspective], we will achieve an identity in our work.” [We see] how that issue is becoming commonplace. Another group pronounces that “a work of an Iranian is Iranian in any case [and there is no need to be sensitive and anxious about lack of identity in it].” [...] The fact is that we have become fixed in the same place and are turning around ourselves. [...] I call this a bogus identity.48

Another important ambition (or temptation) stated at both biennial conferences was participation in the international art scene,49 which would later become a preoccupation of both artists and art officials; as an anonymous author in a leading official art quarterly wrote, “We must be active in the contemporary (inter-
national) art [scene]. This presence, of course, should be based on planned principles. Many suggestions and arguments were put forward with regard to inviting foreign judges or turning the Iranian biennial into an international biennial and exhibiting Iranian art in other international exhibitions, perhaps on the model of the Fifth Tehran Biennial in 1966 and other prerevolutionary exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s. This sponsoring of international exhibitions was considered even by the art officials as one of the programs on the agenda of the Artistic Deputy of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Discernable in the introduction to the catalogue of the Second Biennial is a theme similar to that of the prerevolutionary biennials, particularly of the 1960s: the necessity of paying more attention to contemporary art movements. Following the statement of purpose of the Second Biennial, it is also suggested that,

Exploring the innovative outlooks of the Iranian art elites, bringing about interaction between artists and introducing the contemporary language of art and various movements to the public, encouraging creative and authentic artists, assessing their [artistic] activities, and selecting works based on cultural identity [are other reasons for holding the Biennial].

At the same time, the deliberate and careful survey of traditional Iranian art with a view to its resuscitation and reconstruction was recommended to artists who wanted to use the “contemporary language of art.” The preservation of artistic identity as one of the main conditions for a successful presence on the international scene was also suggested. For example, at the Second Conference of Plastic Arts, Zahra Rahnavard, an art scholar and researcher, commented:

How can we encounter the global [realities] in our works without losing our own identity? There is the continual sense of concern for an ancient culture such as ours, which possesses a rich heritage. We are always afraid of being static and laggardly, or else of running so fast and brashly, without any principle and framework, that we lose our identity completely. If our art wants to have an identity and to establish a dialogue with the international art scene, it should maintain its own aesthetic quality.

Another lecturer at the conference, Ruyin Pakbaz, emphasized the language that contemporary Iranian art should employ to convey its characteristics:

It seems that we do not have any choice against cultural aggression but to shelter in tradition. But it is as if “tradition” meant a few clichés and patterns. We observe how our young talent is being employed [in producing] miniature and naturalistic painting. These kinds of work at their best are repetitious. […] We expect the message that our artist conveys [in his art] to be spiritual, meaning that it defends values, and also to be political, meaning that it protests against the lack of values. Therefore, there is no doubt that this message should be presented in a modern form.

Discernable among the intellectuals of the time were similar signs of sensitivity to the issue of identity, both artistic and cultural, and to the situation of Iranian society in a fast-changing world. This sensibility was usually accompanied by criticism of the structure of Iranian society and reflections on the conjunction of modernity and tradition. In an essay titled “On the Mental Distortions Afflicting Those Civilizations That Have Remained on the Sidelines of History and Played No Part in the Festival of Changes,” Daryoush Shayegan underlines how enriching the situation can be if one accepts the ambivalent challenge consciously, lucidly, and without resentment. But Faraj Sarkouhi, a famous Iranian author, maintains that,

Since the period of the Constitutional Revolution [1905/6–11], and especially since September 1941, our ancestors and we have lived in a society in which all the economic, political, social, and cultural events of all various periods of history, simultaneously and with a complicated and united texture, but not alongside each other or in a parallel way, have had an active, effective, and animated presence. In our society, one can find anything from the ideologies of primitive man to ultramodern interpretations, from the oldest social relationships to the most advanced way of life. From the other side of the globe, the phenomena and changes that are happening in different economic, technological, social, and cultural domains of the world have affected us. Our situation, here, is that of a “man of the border zones.” A man who carries all the relations and cultural baggage of his ancient past with him has not solved the inconsistencies and problems of societal life either in scope of thought or in range of aesthetics and form; he is carrying with him his entire past and present, with all their contradictions and contrasts.

Sarkouhi’s conclusion, nevertheless, traces a kind of neotraditional synthesis that, as he remarks, is to be seen in Iranian vanguard art and literature:

In a society in which one can see primitive tribalism engaged with modern industrialization, and primitive culture based on superstition and magic with modernity, in a society that has not yet solved its traditional problems,
Intellectuals now discussed more ardently the use of modernity both in art and culture, maintaining that through an organic approach to contemporary life, artists could creatively combine the modern language of art with any traditional materials that were still functional. Nevertheless, from their point of view, contemporary culture, life, and interests had to play the main role in this kind of art. At the same time, these intellectuals criticized the insufficiently informed imitation and acceptance of modernism, which might result in a superficial modishness. They also opposed a meaningless return to the past by the mere reproduction of the traditional image.

At this time, the phrase “creating a modern Iranian plastic language” was used to explain the approach of the modernist or neotraditionalist artist, whose goal was described as an effort to establish an independent identity for Iranian art that took into account the efforts of the previous generation. Because in art the final answer is always present during the process of creation, any kind of question—including the connection between past and present, or between pictorial tradition and the modern language of art—had to be answered in the “form” and “structure” of the work of art itself. In neotraditional art, then, the question of “form” or “visual language” could be considered the most important issue. In art as in other areas of human culture, however, there are other concepts underlying the question of form that may originate in social and cultural conditions.

The regeneration of modern Iranian art occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, about a decade into the postrevolutionary period, and coinciding with the painting biennials in which various modernistic approaches were exhibited and rapidly developed. During the late 1970s and 1980s, as Sarkouhi maintains,

It was proved that traditionalism and strict attention to tradition in art, as in other cultural and social realms, would not convey any positive result. The two tendencies of traditionalism—the reproduction of traditional images and revolutionary social realism—affecting the politicized atmosphere of the initial years of the Revolution, increased the crisis of contemporary Iranian painting. They in fact revealed their limitations and paved the way for self-denial.

Thus it was not strange that in the following years considerable attention was directed to the problem of artistic identity, as mentioned above. As the issue of identity had been much emphasized in the sphere of politics and culture, nobody could claim that Iranian art had achieved the ideal. Furthermore, the Revolution and its precepts had created a gap between the new and the prerevolutionary generations of neotraditionalist artists, in particular the Saqqā-khāna artists, and their achievements; the older generation and their works were ignored because they were construed as part of prerevolutionary culture and art and hence depicted as tag ʿut and gharb-zada (“Westoxicated”), reminiscent of the same discourse argued mainly by Iranian intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s. It seemed, however, that the young artists of the new generation might repeat the pattern; the biennials and other major exhibitions after the Revolution witnessed the revived use of symbolic motifs; of both black-and-white elements and colored ones including tilework motifs marked by tints of gold, lapis lazuli, and azure; of seals and gold sheets pasted to the canvas (as in the works of some Saqqā-khāna artists); and of arabesque designs and patterns taken from calico tablecloths. Illumination, miniature paintings (now executed in oil color), and portraits of women with joined eyebrows reminiscent of the Qajar manner all made a reappearance, in combination with modern styles (figs. 10–17).

That these characteristics reflected a discontinuity in the development of modern Iranian art was frequently discussed in the mid-1990s, when the works of prerevolutionary neotraditionalist artists were again exhibited. This observation does not apply to all artists of the 1990s, however, since there were also innovators whose works reveal systematic preoccupation with artistic identity, their own past and present, and neotraditionalism, and who clearly understood what the Saqqā-khāna artists and their followers had been attempting, the ideas they had propounded, and their successes and problems. It was believed that, for the first time in twentieth-century Iranian art, a generation had the chance to experience two important periods of Iranian history, pre- and post-Revolution, and to assimilate practically and intellectually both...
the positive and the negative aspects of those experiences. This generation could play a key role in leading the next one, which, because of the sudden surge of the Revolution and its aspirations, was not aware of what had been achieved by the prerevolutionary generation in various realms of Iranian culture and life, especially art.

Iranian painting during the late 1980s and 1990s can be generally classified in three main groups: traditionalists, modernists, and neotraditionalists. Among these the neotraditionalists were dominant. The situation is similar for Iranian poetry and fiction, which, in 1990, Sarkouhi believed to be flourishing more than at any time in the recent past.65

Among other factors in the mid-1990s that caused the development of art in general and of neotraditionalism in particular, we may again note the important role of the art officials of the country; now, however, these officials had greater flexibility and discernment and a more systematic organization. In particular, after the presidential election of 1997,66 the Plastic Arts Center of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance67 was extraordinarily active, as was the most important organ of the Center, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. Highly effective, the museum tried to play a distinguished role in supporting, presenting, and encouraging various kinds of contemporary Iranian art with systematic programs that included the continuation of more comprehensive biennials, the mounting of thematic exhibitions of contemporary art both Iranian and European-American, and the hosting of seminars, conferences, and academic discussions on different aspects of contemporary art and culture. Although the museum had already started these programs as early as 1990–91 by organizing different national and even international biennials (such as the Cartoon and Illustration Biennials), its activities took fuller form after 1997. After this, the works of numerous Iranian artists active before the Revolution, including the best Saqqâ-khâna paintings, and also of Western contemporary artists, were systematically exhibited. Although many of these works, drawn from the museum’s rich collection, had previously been shown, the organization and quality of the post-1997 exhibitions were unprecedented, and the Saqqâ-khâna artists and their works began to be reintroduced and analyzed in artistic circles. Eminent Iranian artists such as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (b. 1937), who had left the country and cut their ties with the Iranian art scene after the Revolution, perhaps because of lack of attention to their works, were now invited to participate in solo or group exhibitions accompanied by serious discussions: “Pioneers of Modern Iranian Art,” a series of exhibitions that included the works of such Iranian neotraditionalists as Zenderoudi, Massoud Arabshahi (b. 1935), Mohsen Vaziri Moghaddam (b. 1924), Mansureh Hosseini (b. 1926), and Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937) is an example. Meanwhile, the museum increased its activities outside the country through exhibitions in Europe, America, and Asia. As a result, the number of Iranian art publications and public venues for exhibiting the visual arts grew dynamically. The Plastic Arts Center also began to support private galleries in Tehran and other cities with funding and collaboration. The result was a period of artistic flourishing in which the presence of neotraditionalism was central.

Although due to their variety it is difficult to characterize the neotraditional genres in the 1990s, their main characteristics can be distinguished. Neotraditional artists of this period assimilated trends in Western art, synthesizing them with the psychological characteristics and underlying principles of the iconography of tradition and heritage. Some concentrated on exploring their local traditions of Iranian folk art, while others used concepts of ancient Iranian mythol-

Fig. 19. Nosrallah Moslemian, Siyavush’s Trial by Fire, 1990. Acrylic on canvas. Private Collection, Tehran. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)
Fig. 20. Nosratollah Moslemian, *Untitled*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Artist’s collection. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)


Fig. 22. Mostafa Goudarzi, *Untitled*, 1998–99. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. (After Ta’m-i ru’ya: Aṣār-i ʿanjumān nimāṣṣaghā-i du-sālāna-i naqqāsh-i Iran, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)
include the use of forms taken from traditional architecture (both pre-Islamic and Islamic) and calligraphy, as well as the borrowing of visual aspects of classical Persian painting such as the interpretation of natural phenomena, attention to color balance and distribution, the creation of simultaneous dynamism and unity of different areas throughout the two-dimensional space of the painting, and the inclusion of symbolism in both figurative and abstract forms (figs. 8–21). Ancient Persian myths, legends, and literary works frequently appear as subject matter, whose forms show a tendency towards symbolic and allegorical expression (figs. 19–23). Also characteristic are surface textures influenced by traditional Iranian building materials, such as mud, straw, and colored tiles.

Work of the 1990s neotraditionalists may be classified in three groups: figurative, abstract, and a third, more conservative and diverse, category. The figurative artists have mainly been interested in contemporary social and philosophical concepts and have tried to represent these concepts in the particular context in which they find themselves as artists. Modernist in attitude, they draw from the conceptual and pictorial aspects of their past; although their language is taken from the vocabulary of contemporary art, they have benefited greatly from their pictorial tradition. Their use of the pictorial characteristics of classical Persian painting is exemplified by such aspects of their work as color scheme, spatial composition, two-dimensional image structure, and the inclusion of symbolic elements and concepts. Experimenting with different modern styles, such as Symbolism and, especially, Expressionism—perhaps because of its affinity with the dominant atmosphere of Iranian society and the experience of such events as the Revolution and the war—has made it possible for them to express their feelings. More recently, they have also addressed ancient Iranian myths or Islamic mysticism; the representation of mythological and epic subjects from traditional sources such as the Shāhnāma of Firdawsi has emerged as one of their tendencies (fig. 19).68 The use of modernist language is deliberately emphasized by these artists; in their view, the past can be revisited and resurveyed by contemporary artists and during this process can be restored via a contemporary and innovative interpretation.

Among the most active and distinguished figures of the group are Nosratollah Moslemian (b. 1951), Ahmad Amin-Nazar (b. 1950), Mostafa Goudarzi (b. 1960), and Jamshid Haghighat-Shenas (b. 1963) (figs. 20–21).
Particularly exemplary are the works of Nosratollah Moslemian. While continually reexamining and reinterpreting traditional artistic genres, Moslemian’s art concerns contemporary socio-cultural realities, especially those of his own society. It at once takes modern aesthetics into account and breathes in the environment of Persian classical art. Although his forms do not directly imitate those of Persian classical painting, they contain some of its pictorial metaphors, synthesizing the dichotomous characteristics of past pictorial tradition and contemporary artistic language and social concerns. For Moslemian, the process of painting encompasses all aspects of his life and work; he believes, for instance, that elements of suspense in his painting are influenced by the paradox and suspense in his society and life:

...my personality consists of three paradoxical parts, including modern, traditional, and also the mixture of these two. These factors that are there in my “self” have resulted in the formation of my works.69

About the work of the preceding vanguard neotraditionalist artists and their achievements and failures in dealing with the problem of artistic identity during the past decades, Moslemian declares:

I am aware that previous generations of Iranian artists sacrificed their talents and innovativeness in order to deeply understand and then internalize the achievements of contemporary art while considering their own cultural situation. It seems that they carried out, more or less, their artistic responsibility within their own context. What has been the outcome of their attempts and experience for us? Is it possible to have an artistic identity and to play a role in the formation of contemporary Iranian art without consideration of our roots, pictorial traditions, or other experiences of previous generations?70

He does not consider identity as fixed and constant, but rather as “viable”—capable of growing or developing—a quality that changes according to socio-cultural changes. He continues: “We—in our life and artistic creation at the same time—are continually forming our identity. I am thinking deliberately about this “viable” identity in my painting.”71 He believes such deliberation is necessary for societies such as Iran’s where the tension still exists between tradition and modernity, requiring the artist to critically rethink both.

Moslemian also elaborates his reference to the cultural past:

...There is no doubt that we possess an ancient cultural

Fig. 24. Nosratollah Moslemian, *Untitled*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 65 x 55 cm. Private collection, Tehran. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

Fig. 25. Nosratollah Moslemian, *Untitled*, 1996. Acrylic on canvas. Private collection, Tehran. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)
background, and any Iranian artist should eventually refer to this background in accordance with his own point of view and knowledge. My reference to [it] includes the use of symbols, motifs, color, and myth.\textsuperscript{72}

Having selected his visual vocabulary from Persian poetry, painting, and mythology, Moslemian then transforms these images through a modernistic approach in which the identity of their origin is nevertheless retained, and reuses them in a lyrical mode in the composition of his paintings. In one of his paintings, for example, the elements of moon and mirror are juxtaposed in abstract fashion, removed from their ancient relationship in which the moon is always seen reflected in the mirror. In other paintings, gazelles and cypress trees—familiar metaphors in Persian painting and poetry—are lyrically evoked (fig. 24).

The importance of pluralism and the parallel reflection of different viewpoints—ancient and new, concrete and abstract—can be considered a manifest speciality of contemporary art in general, and permeates even philosophy, science, and social life. Such pluralism, albeit differently perceived, continues to play a role in Moslemian’s recent paintings, which remain within the context of his own tradition. From its origin, neofigurative painting in general can be said to have been based on multiplicity of meaning and common human experience; it has more recently profited by drawing not only on mythology but also on
Fig. 28. Zia al-Din Emami, *Mi’rāj*, 1986. Gouache and watercolor on paper, 60 x 40 cm. (After *Ru’yā-yi firstågtān*, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 29. Homayoun Salimi, *Untitled*, 1990. Mixed media on paper, 21 x 16 cm. Artist’s collection. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)


Discourses on Postrevolutionary Iranian Art

Figures 28–30 illustrate the diversity of styles and approaches in contemporary Iranian art. These works reflect the influence of various cultural and philosophical movements, including traditional and abstract art.

Figures 28 and 29 depict works by Zia al-Din Emami and Homayoun Salimi, respectively. Emami’s *Mi’rāj* is a gouache and watercolor painting, while Salimi’s *Untitled* is a mixed media artwork on paper. Both artworks showcase the artist’s unique vision and expression of contemporary existence.

Figure 30 features a work by Mohammad Ebrahim Jafari, titled *Untitled*. This monoprint and ink piece on paper represents another aspect of Iranian contemporary art, emphasizing individual perception and aesthetic structure.

In contrast to the neotraditionalists practicing figurative art, a second group has dealt in abstraction. In many of their works the decorative quality manifest in *Saqqâ-khāna* art appears to have been eliminated; they rely instead on the abstract characteristics of Irano-Islamic art, favoring mystical and spiritual concepts—Eastern and Iranian mysticism and gnosticism—over social issues. Another genre, what might be termed sciences such as the new psychology, an approach visible in the artist’s work (fig. 25).

Declaring, “My ideology is my style,” Moslemian adds,

So my tragic mind views my surrounding realities in disjoined condition. I have attempted to achieve my individual aesthetic structure in accordance with my own perception of the world. This structure should have some similarities with the pictorial tradition of my past, and should express contemporary existence. 73

In contrast to the neotraditionalists practicing figurative art, a second group has dealt in abstraction. In many of their works the decorative quality manifest in *Saqqâ-khāna* art appears to have been eliminated; they rely instead on the abstract characteristics of Irano-Islamic art, favoring mystical and spiritual concepts—Eastern and Iranian mysticism and gnosticism—over social issues. Another genre, what might be termed
a neocalligraphic approach—involves the use of calligraphy as the sole compositional element.

Distinguished members of this group are Jafar Rouhbakhsh (1941–96), Homayoun Salimi (b. 1948), Zia al-Din Emami (b. 1922), Mohammad Ebrahim Jafari (b. 1940), and Mohammad Ehsai (b. 1939) (figs. 26, 28–31). Salimi, who gained his artistic reputation in the postrevolutionary period, can be considered representative of this group. Even though he is Western-educated and his art was cultivated in the West, it is also rooted in the Irano-Islamic past. In his case, this is the result of his interest in the artistic and cultural heritage of Iran, which—once he was at a distance from it—stimulated his unconscious towards it and resulted in its nostalgic representation in his works.

Salimi does not merely repeat traditional motifs and patterns but innovatively utilizes the geometric structure of Irano-Islamic art and architecture. Forms in his painting are not thematic; rather, they are independent entities, free of any narrative or symbolic meaning. The implication and structure of the picture are both created through abstraction, which results in pictorial metaphor and poetic feeling without reference to a literary text (figs. 32, 33).

Salimi has expressed his admiration for such pioneer neotraditionalist artists as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi (fig. 27), whose paintings, which he saw when he was very young, impressed him even then. In Salimi’s own work, however, there is an obvious difference from Saqqākhāna abstract works, particularly Zenderoudi’s, in the omission of decorative characteristics. Nevertheless, there are obvious similarities in

Fig. 31. Mohammad Ehsai, Alifbā-yi azalī (Eternal Alphabet), 2000. Gouache and car paint on cardboard. Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. (Photo: published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 32. Homayoun Salimi, Untitled, 1984. Mixed media and acrylic on paper, 10 x 14.7 cm. Artist’s collection. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)
the two artists’ geometric compositional structure and employment of the stylized elements of Irano-Islamic art, as well as in their mutual benefit from abstract art. Even though there are no elements of calligraphy or religious folk art in Salimi’s painting as there were, for instance, in the work of Zenderoudi and Pilaram between 1962 and 1964, one cannot ignore Salimi’s constant use of Irano-Islamic motifs, including hexagonal and tetragonal forms that originally had a decorative function. Salimi, however, has employed those sources with more flexible, freer application of the brush (figs. 29, 32, 33).

At first interested in purely abstract art, Salimi started to utilize the geometric forms of motifs found in the details of Persian classical paintings and then began to structure his works on the basis of their formal organization, such as the differing sizes of their various spatial divisions (fig. 32). Stylized motifs and forms are simplified and enlarged to become a main element of the picture, rather than the ornamental or decorative detail of the original image (see fig. 29). As Salimi himself mentions, his use of the visual elements of Persian paintings—including illumination and motifs within these paintings—was a bridge that later led him to exploit other elements of Persian art, including architectural form, structure, and decoration (figs. 33, 34), as well as the designs and colors of carpets, rugs, and kilims. At one stage in his career, mainly between 1985 and 1990, he based the structural frameworks of his works on squares and rectangles with, of course, some modifications to their strict geometrical shapes (fig. 33).

More conservative and committed to conventional styles such as Realism and Surrealism, or even to Persian classical painting, is the third group of artists: Aydin Aghdashloo (b. 1940), Ali Akbar Sadeghi (b. 1937),

Fig. 33. Homayoun Salimi, Untitled, 1986. Acrylic and mixed media on paper. Artist’s collection. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

Fig. 34. Interior view of the bath at the Bagh-i Fin, Kashan, seventeenth century. Photograph by Homayoun Salimi, 1987. (Reproduced courtesy of the artist)
Fig. 36. Shahla Habibi, *Niyâjish* (Praying), 1995. Mixed media, 60 x 100 cm. (After *Naqqâshi mu‘âṣir-i Īrân*, barguzıda’i az ăsâr-i sîvumîn nimâyishgâh-i du-sâlânâ-i naqqâshi-i Īrân, published with permission of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art)

Fig. 37. Mohammad Ali Taraghijah, *Harmonious*, 1993. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 30 x 22 cm. Present location unknown. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

Fig. 38. Parvaneh Etemadi, *Pâshish-i asb* (Horse Blanket), 1997. Collage and colored pencil on paper, 120 x 80 cm. Private collection, Tehran. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)
Shahla Habibi (b. 1945), Mohammad Ali Taraghijah (b. 1943), Parvaneh Etemadi (b. 1947), and Farah Osouli (b. 1953) (figs 35–39). As has become clear, the neotraditionalists’ main intention has been to achieve, in both formal construction and content, a new framework for art that, although modern and familiar in its use of visual language, does not adhere to a specific style or school of modern European-American art, but instead creates unique forms by stylizing and reconceptualizing various contemporary artistic achievements. Furthermore, if a major preoccupation of neotraditionalists is the issue of artistic identity and the benefit to be gained from their traditional pictorial heritage, they have avoided direct and literal copying of this heritage. The approaches of the artists in this third group therefore seem not to fit comfortably with the definition of neotraditionalism we proffer. Nevertheless, because their work in various ways suggests the intentional mixture of traditional material and modern Western art, we feel justified in including their names in the neotraditionalist category.

Emphasis on the Iranian artistic heritage, even in its interaction with the contemporary art scene, continues into the new millennium. For instance, with regard to the Fifth Iranian Painting Biennial, held in 2000, we read:
It would seem that attending to the national, artistic, and social heritage is the only way to develop Iranian art. Even if we wished to proceed in global contemporary art movements, keeping a distinctive character that originates in the specific values and traits of Iranian art would be the only successful method; otherwise, in overall contemporary art, which is still governed by modernism, contemporary Iranian art would appear inferior.29

Neotraditionalism has recently appeared even in new media, including the works of Iranian conceptual artists who have recently been actively exhibiting. The use of Iranian mysticism and the Islamic/Shiite pictorial tradition was manifest in the first exhibition of conceptual art, held in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art in 2001 (fig. 40). Not only in these new guises but also in its principal forms, neotraditionalism lives on vigorously in present-day Iranian art.

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NOTES

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1. Considering the pluralistic nature of the postmodern era, in Iranian society as in others, one cannot specify as dominant any single school or movement; although neotraditionalist art in the 1990s is discussed as an important discourse of this period, it does not constitute a school or even a coherent group of artists.


4. Prevalent in these state policies was promoting awareness of the contemporary artistic scene, mainly with reference to European-American art, and of “national” and “Iranian” identity.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. In addition, works such as those of Kamal al-Mulk (1847/8–1940) and his school, which had almost disappeared from the contemporary Iranian art scene after the ascendance of modernist art in the 1940s and 1950s, were again included in official exhibitions and promoted, mainly because of their naturalism. Consequently, Kamal al-Mulk’s works were published and a surprising revolutionary and anti-monarchical ethos even ascribed to his art and character.

11. Later named the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, this ministry in fact performed the same duties as the Pahlavi-era Ministry of Culture and Art.


14. Ibid.


16. Ságákhána was a movement characterized mainly by the works of such artists as Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Faramarz Pilarom, Parviz Tanavoli, Massoud Arabshahi, Jazeh Tabatabai, Nasser Ovissi, and Sadeq Tabrizi. It first emerged at the Third Tehran Biennial in 1962 and was developed in the works of many artists, especially in the 1960s. The movement was defined as an attempt to establish a national school of art that synthesized modern and traditional approaches. The main feature of early works of the Ságákhána, in particular those of Zenderoudi, Pilarom, and Tanavoli, was the use of Shiite folk elements presented in abstract form. For further study of this movement, see Hamid Keshmirishekan, “The Ságákhánh School in the 1960s,” Iranian Studies 38, 4 (Dec. 2005): 607–30.

17. Nikki Reddie, however, argues that “the Islamic state included many features of parliamentarianism, nationalism, socialism, and a ‘Third Worldist’ reaction against the West […], while at the same time retaining the Islamic identity that was still crucial to most Iranians.” (N. R. Reddie and E. Hooglund, The Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic [New York, 1986], 11.) It was therefore this fundamental mixture of traditional and revolutionary ideas, rather than “fundamentalism,” that formed the essence of the Islamic Revolution.


20. The earlier Islamic universalist tendency—pan-Islamism echoed in such themes as export of the revolution and denunciation of Persian nationalism—had contributed to the Islamists’ vulnerability regarding patriotic values. Nevertheless, running a complex modern state and coming to terms with a wide range of domestic and foreign issues, especially the eight-year
These neotraditionalist artists were followers of the Saqqākhāna movement in the period before the Revolution. They were able to continue their artistic activity in the prerevolutionary era, however, due to the close relationship of their work with classical calligraphy and to its meaningful content, which now became mainly religious or political.

It should be noted that there was no standard definition of or literature regarding the term “cultural identity” in this period; rather it was largely a rhetorical device that referred mainly to Iranian-Islamic history.

The First Biennial consisted of two sections: the main part was entitled “The Free Subject,” and the second part “In Advocacy of the Palestinian Islamic Revolution.” By this, M. Mohajer later (1998) noted in “Avvaln nimāyīshgāhī-du-sālānā-i naqqāshān-i Īrān” (Tehran, 1371/1992): 3

Advocacy of the Palestinian Islamic Revolution. By this, as M. Mohajer later (1998) noted in “Avvaln nimāyīshgāhī-du-sālānā-i naqqāshān-i Īrān,” 120, the biennial secretariat wished to emphasize its allegiance to the revolutionary aspirations and problems of the Islamic world.


Ibid.


The judging panel announced its criteria for selecting works thus: “Having considered the valuable subjects (Islamic Revolution; spiritual thought; mystical subjects; social, political, and cultural issues)...the formal aspect of works...should be inspired by the [Iranian-Islamic] cultural and artistic heritage, with an innovative and creative approach”; see anonymous, “Duvumīn nimāyīshgāhī-du-sālānā-i naqqāshān-i Īrān,” Māh-nāma-i hunarhā-yi tajassumū 4 (1372/1993): 1.

Achieving a national school of art was a great desire of Iranian art custodians and artists in the period before the Revolution, especially in the early 1960s; the Saqqākhāna movement, in fact, resulted from that desire.


The first Iranian arts and crafts comprehensive exhibition, called “A Festival of Iranian Art,” was held from Sept. 12 to Oct. 13, 1991, in Düsseldorf, Germany. Launched to introduce Iranian art in the West, this exhibition comprised 150 works, most of them by traditional Iranian artists and craftsmen, including miniature paintings, carpets, calligraphy, Qahvākhāna (coffeehouse) paintings, ceramics, tiles, etc.


During the biennials, a number of foreign artists and art critics (most of them from France or Russia) were invited by the Museum of Contemporary Art, although their presence played no role in the biennial judging process.

It should be noted that the Iranian Caricature Biennial had already (in 1991) become an international exhibition that included works both executed and selected by Iranians and foreigners.

These suggestions came primarily from experienced artists of the prerevolutionary generation or from Western-educated artists and art critics. Examples of such opinions appear in the articles or interviews published in the issues of Noqūd devoted to the Second Biennial exhibition and conferences (see note 47, above).

A. Khoshroo, “Sukhānānāt-i āghā-yi muhandis Abu ‘l Qasim...

55. The cultural atmosphere of Iranian artistic gatherings and the art literature of the 1950s and, especially, the 1960s, e.g., the introductions to the Tehran Biennial catalogues, generally focused on two main topics: contemporary artistic achievements in accordance with international art movements, and the formation of national or Iranian art.


60. The year that Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi shah, was dethroned and exiled and his son Mohammad Reza came to power. In 1941, during the Second World War, British military forces occupied Iran, leaving shortly after Iran officially joined the Allies in the war against Germany in 1943. During these years Iran was essentially governed by Allied troops, which brought about more contact between Iranians and the West and a period of greater self-expression in Iranian literature, art, and the press.


62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 67–68.


66. Sayyid Mohammad Khatami, previously Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, who had a cultural bent and was famous for his high regard for art, was elected president in 1997. Among others, the Iranian artistic community, who had favorable memories of Khatami’s policies as minister, benefited from an unprecedented relaxation of the rules.

67. In addition to the Barg Gallery and other major official galleries affiliated with the Tehran Municipality, more than sixty galleries in Tehran and many more in other Iranian provinces are now active.

68. One of the successful group exhibitions, “The Epic of Kings (Shāhnhāma) and the Contemporary Iranian Artist,” was held in 1990 to honor the thousandth anniversary of Firdawsi’s Shāhnāma. Participating artists included Nosratollah Moslemian (see fig. 19), Mir Ya’qoub Ammamehpich, Sara Irvani, Massoumeh Mozafrī, Soghra Zareh, Abbas Saraei, Tournan Ghaedri, Hossein Ghara-Golou, Parastou Frouar, Arya Eghbal, Amin Nourani, Fatemeh Etemadi, and Davood Mozafrī.


74. Although Rouhbakhsh began his professional career in the years before the Revolution, his most fruitful artistic period was in the postrevolutionary years, especially the 1990s, during which he was an active and influential artist. His paintings during the late 1980s and 1990s are closely related to early Saqqākhāna works (cf. figs. 26 and 27).

75. Salimi obtained his doctorate in aesthetics and the science of art from the Sorbonne, Paris, in 1990.


77. For better understanding this argument, cf. figs. 27 and 32.

