

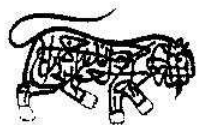
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A Glance at the
Opportunities for and Perils to
Post-Revolutionary Art
in the
Islamic Republic of Iran

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Edited, Translated and Annotated by
Black Archer Williams



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Abstract

Before the Islamic Revolution¹ of Iran there was tension and even a conflict between art and religion. But after the revolution, art became engaged with the teachings of Islam and was thus welcomed by the religious community, finding its legitimacy and rightful place in society as a consequence. This new kind of art was the result of the influence of the revolution, which totally changed the concept of religion as previously conceived to one that was idealistic (in the sense of an art which believes in ideals and strives [to do its part] to fulfill them), yet was action-based, and aimed to establish a new society with a vision that was global.

¹ What is actually meant here is the word uprising or insurrection, as in a movement for the *restoration* of an order, rather than "revolution" which, strictly speaking, means the upending of an order. But the word revolution is what has been used to characterize the Islamic Insurrection from the very beginning, such that it has secured its place in common usage. Thus, using the phrase "Islamic Insurrection" would seem pedantic and awkward; but that is what is meant: a movement to restore the *original* (pre-despotic) order, namely, God's order.

But a part of society still was not on board with the idea of the integration of art and religion. The combination of art and religion on the one hand led to the integration of religious teachings and artistic approaches. At the same time, as the religious community took steps to welcome this new religiously-inclined movement in art, a great boom in the world of art emerged in Iran. What was anticipated and hoped for was that this new commonality between religion and art would bring about an expansion in the art and culture of the new religiously-based society; but this did not happen, and reactionary elements gradually reemerged.

This essay presents a comprehensive picture of this movement by providing the global, historical and domestic perspectives in the various cultural fronts involved. It also discusses the fault lines created in the transformation process and provides recommendations for the proper resolution to the most important problems that have arisen as a result of these changes.

Key Words: Islam, Art, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Religion, Opportunities and Perils.

Preface

Before the triumph of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, religion and art acted in opposition to each other in most instances. With the advent of the revolution, two things happened:

1. The art world became aware of the significance of religion and its teachings, and as a consequence of this awareness, engaged it as its subject matter.
2. The community of the religious-minded in Iranian society opened their doors to art, and the solid wall which had been erected by the religious community to protect itself from the plague of decadence and even degenerate "art" was removed, granting legitimacy to the sphere of what had hitherto been non-Islamic art.

These events came about as a result of the presence of true Islam in the revolution – an Islam which varied from its pre-revolutionary predecessor and was distinguished by the

characteristics of being idealistic², activist (as opposed to the "quietism" of the Islamic seminaries prior to Imam Khomeini's movement), having a global perspective, and being intent on building community; an Islam whose most important exponents were Imam Khomeini himself, as well as his students and devotees, among whose ranks were such luminaries as Ayatollah Motahharī, Ayatollah Behrī, Ayatollah Khāmeneī, Chamrān, Āvīnī, etc; and Aī Sharīfī, of course. Now given this comingling of religion and art, and of the world of religiosity with that of the artistic inclined, it goes without saying that a segment from each world remained outside of the circle that was common to both domains. But the activities within this circle that was held in common by both worlds brought about a fusion of religious teachings and approaches to their subject matter which were artistic; and on the other hand, a new impetus was given to art with the dissolution of the self-imposed boundaries which the religious community had erected before it. In other words, important events took place in both intellectual and practical spheres whose effects were manifested in the production, distribution and consumption of art.

In order to better conceive of the importance of these events, it might serve our purposes to take a look, on one hand, at superficially religious societies such as those of the Tālebān and Saudi Arabia; and on the other, to consider the

² Again, idealist is meant here as in the rest of this essay in the sense of an art which believes in ideals and whose main purpose is their fulfillment.

decadence that has appeared in the art of communist and capitalist societies.³ Over and above the historical precedents that we have, the tensions and strains between religiosity and art are clearly and perfectly observable in various social processes, and it is in this field that one of the wondrous bounties of the Islamic Revolution shines.

The expectation was that the new chapter of the comingling of art and religion would continue and turn into the dominant paradigm of the art world; i.e. that the criteria and indicators within the arena of art and of the activity of artists would be in harmony with those of the Islamic Revolution, and additionally, that the sense of affinity to art of the religiously minded would gradually increase, and that they would feel a greater need for art and for its production and consumption. But this expectation remained unfulfilled and gradually, a reactionary movement began to take shape.

With the waning of the potency of the basic ideas and ideals within the religious ideology of the Islamic Revolution and the hardening of the lines of demarcation between traditional pre-revolutionary religiosity (which was of course filled with reprehensible innovations which had nothing to do with the original religion) and politics and society and idealism and standing up for truth and social justice, the luminous fruit of the Revolution in the field of art gradually began to lose their luster and became indistinct. And with the

³ Literally, "of the societies of East and West".

concurrent efforts of faithless artists and the artless among the religious community, at first the enlargement of the circle of the common ground between art and religiosity came to a halt, and this process ultimately led to the extrication of religion from art and of the extrication of art from the religious life.

Memories of the incursions of alien cultures took the place of a self-confidence which had its origins in the revolutionary spirit which engendered the courage to step outside the bounds of alien paradigms and models. Important roles were played in this regard (1) by the milieu within the art departments of the universities which was still infused with Westernized professors, texts and methods; (2) by seasoned and professional artists and their pre-revolutionary ideations and commitments; and (3) by the dominant milieu of affiliated institutions, especially that which existed within the mass media and in foreign (and at times domestic) art festivals. On the other hand, thousands of cadres of Islamic/revolutionary art such as those formed for the purposes of performing revolutionary songs and ballads and plays in centers such as mosques were gradually expelled from the margins upon the domination of a spirit of reaction and the return of pseudo-traditional innovations, being replaced with certain pre-revolutionary activities.

In the midst of all this, there were of course new groups which emerged which were able to absorb and take on the form of the religiosity which had been stripped of its idealist

elements by bogus and disingenuous means – a religiosity which was bereft of its central core – the insistence on the establishment of social justice – having been replaced by an illusory and politically unthreatening “spirituality”, and had thus lost its appeal. These newly-founded organizations were in effect disguised businesses which absorbed a large share of the budgets allocated for resisting and fighting against the incursion of alien cultures (*tahājom-e farhangī*), and which simultaneously gave religious art a bad name. One of the main bases of these groups consisted of certain organizations and associations which were located within the system.

What we have some thirty plus years after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution consists of the following:

A treasure trove of works of art in different categories and mediums which demonstrate the possibility of fusing the principles and purposes of the Islamic Revolution with art, and which have responded in practical terms to the false theses and assertions which allege the innate incompatibility of religion and contemporary art. Additionally, these works of art are considered to be endowed with high and in some cases excellent standards in the Iranian art world in terms of their technical and aesthetic criteria. These works include feature length films, plays, novels, poetry, caricatures, paintings, music, calligraphic art, and so on.

2. A group of highly skilled artists who were the product of the conditions which prevailed during the early years of the

revolution, and who were recognized and had established positions as leading artists at the national level in various art forms such as poetry, literature, cinematography, sculpture, music, and so on.

3. A vast collection of art which was produced by artists who were enamored of the ideals of the Enlightenment and which, as such, had no commitment to the principles and objectives of the Islamic Revolution; and who were able to regroup after having suffered material and intellectual setbacks during the early years of the revolution, to train the next generation of Enlightenment-oriented artists. This generation benefitted and continues to benefit from the active and targeted support of the secular Enlightenment-allied intellectual and media environment, and is at times the beneficiary of the support of foreign forces active in the world of art, such as film festivals and foreign media providing coverage and favorable reviews for their work. This group of artists enjoys significant support among the governmental cultural administrators of the country, and has succeeded in acquiring access to much of the artistic and cultural facilities of the organs of state.

4. A vast group of money-grubbing opportunist businessmen and professional artists for whom the primary function of art is a means for them to make money and who view the budgets for the production of art projects as business opportunities by means of which they can enrich themselves in illegitimate ways which bring no added value to the

enterprise. We can perhaps characterize this current as “pork barrel” art projects⁴; that is, “art” projects which are characterized by their being profitable for the private sector and which provides fodder for the balance sheets and financial reports of government departments, from such vast organizations as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Corporation (IRIB) and the Office for the Propagation of Islam, to the public relations and cultural departments of the various budget-grabbing governmental organs – all of these are the object of the avarice of the opportunists within this current.

5. Organized and targeted planning, by both domestic and foreign forces, for strengthening art whose worldview, purpose and commitment is secular and the concomitant corollary of this program, which is the purposive and systematic weakening of art that is the product of the Islamic Revolution. This program is engaged in creating problems by creating false memes and by framing issues by means of bogus frames of reference; and busies itself with the regurgitation and reproduction of the non-Islamic and anti-Islamic art of past generations, be this of the liberal,

⁴ For non-American readers, this is a reference from the American political system: Wikipedia defines it as follows: “Pork barrel is a metaphor for the appropriation of government spending for localized projects secured solely or primarily to bring money to a representative’s district. The usage originated in American English. In election campaigns, the term is used in a derogatory fashion to attack opponents.”