

ART

Giving Voice To Iran's Artists



Bahman Mohassess. *Untitled*. circa 1989. Collage made from cut out magazines, painted. Funded by Maryam and Edward Eisler

29 March 2017

In its current exhibition, closing this Sunday, London's British Museum showcases its recent acquisitions of works on paper by Iranian artists, reports Anna Brady

London's major galleries have in the past been found wanting in their collections of Middle Eastern Modern and Contemporary art. But that is changing; see the Tate Modern's active Middle East and North Africa (MENAAC) acquisitions committee, which has helped furnish the new Switch House extension.

The British Museum is also celebrating its expanded collection of Modern and Contemporary Iranian art with an exhibition called Iranian Voices in the John Addis Gallery. It showcases recently acquired works on paper, most bought in the past couple of years from galleries, direct from artists or their estates, or through gifts. It has been curated by Dr Venetia Porter, Curator of the Islamic and Modern Middle East Art Department, and includes artists of different generations which together tell a “multiplicity of stories” about the country. “The key thing that is of interest for me as a curator and for the British Museum in building this collection is that these works are a way of looking at the recent history of Iran and how artists engage in such interesting ways not only with history but cultural and literary tradition,” says Porter, “The works are in my view fascinating and beautiful in themselves but also act as windows.”



Shahpour Pouyan. After 'Rustam Slaying the White Div.' 2015. Mixed Media. Funded by the Farjam Foundation.

© Shahpour Pouyan. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

The works, spanning collage, prints, artist books and photography, share a certain narrative feel. They are thick with references to Iran's cultural and sociological history, both the legendary tales of ancient Persia such as the *Shahnameh*, or Book of Kings, written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi in circa AD 1010, and commentary on recent political events.

It's a stylistically diverse selection. Highlights include the handful of lithographs by the Modernist Bahman Mohassess (1931-2010), part of the ongoing series of prints he made between 1989 until his death from collages consisting of cut-out magazine images, often then drawn over. These personal works use collage to dark effect, such as *Pour Munch*, a reference to *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, and the curious turbaned shark, alluding to Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, President of Iran from 1989-1997, who was nicknamed *kuseh*, Persian for shark. Also included are works by poster boys of Iranian art, Parviz Tanavoli, Fereydoun Ave and Ali Banisadr, alongside Iranian-British photographer and film director Mitra Tabrizian, Afsoon Afsoon and Shahpour Pouyan, to name just a few.

The acquisitions have been made possible through the British Museum Patrons' group CaMMEA (Contemporary and Modern Middle East Art), Maryam and Edward Eisler, ardent advocates of art from the region, and other donors.

Iranian Voices runs until 2 April 2017. britishmuseum.org