

## Narratives of the 60s

Sohrab Mahdavi

It is significant that the question of the impact of the 60s on the non-Western world is always framed as the struggle of intellectuals and artists from the lesser nations to come to terms with their own sense of artistic or intellectual inadequacy. The art scene in Third World countries had always lagged behind, it seemed, trying to catch up with a tectonic force that had swept the globe with unbound youthfulness and energy. The pressure was on the Third World artist to surrender and to produce.



Photograph of Marcos Grigorian

For the Iranian visual artist of the decade the main preoccupation was always two-pronged: How to be modern in an age that demanded non-conformity, rebelliousness, and breaking away from tradition, and how to preserve a distinct identity as the only way to lessen the pressure of measuring up to an ideal of Western art whose site of origin was always elsewhere. It is the pull between these two forces that constitutes the *zeitgeist* of the 60s for the Third World artist. At one end, values of the decade were being harangued as revolutionary, groundbreaking, unprecedented, and universal. The youth rebelled against state domination in all aspects of life, against the one-dimensional organizational man, the shackles of conformity. The Vietnam War became a pretext for questioning the status quo as well as the power structure. At the other end, the Third World artist was facing another challenge, one that his 50s' predecessors, for whom "originality was submerged in the effort to absorb new outlooks, and to learn and master new techniques"<sup>1</sup> didn't concern themselves with. It was a time when the question of originality was posed with increasing passion and urgency.



Marcos Grigorian, mud, hay, found objects

It was the Armenian Iranian Marcos Grigorian who, having graduated from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, returned to Iran in 1954 to open a gallery and to prepare the ground for modernist artists in Tehran to explore their own roots.<sup>2</sup> In his Galerie Esthetique in Tehran, alongside works of modernists, he put on display works of traditional artists like *qahvehkhaneh* painters.<sup>3</sup> He was also one of the organizers of the 1st Tehran Biennial in 1958.

Grigorian was an influential teacher at the University of Tehran's Fine Arts Academy. He encouraged his students to look for elements of their own popular culture. This was in direct contrast to the universalist orientation of 50s artists like Jalil Ziapour, who embraced Western mandates in an age when this was seen as an acceptable means to progress. Grigorian's works inspired many 60s Iranian artists, notably Hossein Zenderoudi, to look for and make use of native materials and themes. In one painting Zenderoudi copies, scene-by-scene, the theme of a *qahvehkhaneh* painting. One must view this newfound interest in religious Iranian elements against the backdrop of an American-led coup in 1953 and the attempt by the Shah of Iran to project himself as heir to 2500 years of civilization. Government organizations only commissioned works that emphasized the pre-Islamic grandeur of Persia.

Indeed a group of modernist artists were increasingly appealing to religious symbolism to bring originality to their works.<sup>4</sup> Art critic Karim Emami called them "*Saqqakhaneh*" artists, to underline



1st Tehran Biennial poster (Marcos Grigorian was one of the organizers).

<sup>1</sup> Ehsan Yarshater, "Contemporary Persian Painting," in *Highlights of Persian Art*, ed. Richard Ettinghausen and Ehsan Yarshater (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 363.

<sup>2</sup> Fereshteh Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, ed. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (New York: IB Tauris, 2002), 48.

<sup>3</sup> "Coffeehouse" painters were known for the religious themes of their *pardeh* or drapes that told in pictorial form the story of religious legends. When hung on one of the walls of a coffeehouse, these drapes would become the backdrop of a one-man theater where a reciter of epic poetry would tell the story depicted on the drape for the clientele.

<sup>4</sup> In conversation with performance artist and writer Jinoos Taghizadeh, winter 2010, Tehran. Taghizadeh maintains that religious codes were used by Western-oriented Iranian artists as a political tool to oppose cultural oppression under the monarchy.

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Jalil Ziapour, *Khorus [Cock]*,  
late 1950s

their shared sense of religious fetishism.<sup>5</sup> A Parson's School of Art graduate, Monir Shahroudi-Farmanfarman was mesmerized by mirror-works in mosques and Islamic architecture, as well as by primitive textile patterns. Also a student at Accademia di Belle Arti in Italy, Parviz Tanavoli came back to Iran to hunt for artifacts –locks, keys, knobs, grillwork, prayers, talismanic messages, tribal rugs and gravestones– not only to collect but to incorporate them into his sculptures. Zenderudi, educated in Paris, painted elaborate canvases filled with numerological charts, *qahvehkhaneh* themes, and inscriptions on vestments. Faramarz Pilaram brought gold and silver paint to a canvas to depict the *Mosques of Isfahan*. All invariably made ample use of Persian calligraphy, which opened the door to a whole new set of meanings and interpretations.

This did not mean that they believed in the religious/Iranian content of their works. They saw in these objects, detached from their universe of meaning, the power to break free from the trap of copying the West, and a way to come up with an authentic art movement. In fact, the question of giving wing to a "movement" was probably the reason why "*Saqqakhaneh*" was used with increasing frequency by cultural authorities, because they considered it as the beginning of a genuine artistic movement that could put Iranian art on the Western artistic map.<sup>6</sup>



Hossein Zenderoudi on his  
painted car, 1963, Paris

Outside of modern arts, things were a little different. Blighted by failed attempts during the 40s and 50s to establish a participatory government that would reflect the will of a people hungry for autarky in the colonial era,<sup>7</sup> the Iranian political milieu moved to a different plane in the 60s. The ease in political crackdowns of the 50s (following the 1953 Coup that reinstated the Shah) helped the politicization of the decade. Many intellectuals and writers, who had overwhelmingly formed leftist, secular groups previously, couched the words in religious symbolism because in that way they could voice their demands without being rebaited. This is a period when the call for "going back to roots" is often heard in intellectual circles.<sup>8</sup> In 1962, the same year that modernist Iranian artists stage their first show in the US coinciding with the 3rd Tehran Biennial, Jalal al-Ahmad's *Occidentosis* was published. According to Al-e Ahmad, the disease plaguing Third World countries, as the title of his book suggests, is their inability to hold on to an independent identity. Instead, he advocates a return to roots presumed lost in the fever of catching up with the West.

During the 60s, the official Center for the Visual Arts in Iran became heavily active and this was in large part due to the patronage of Farah Pahlavi, the Queen, whose husband did not necessarily share her enthusiasm for the arts.<sup>9</sup> Many of the artists who had studied abroad or had chosen to live in exile in the 50s, were invited to come back to the country with prospects of a lucrative career. The Center commissioned works by many of the young artists of the decade, including Shahroudi-Farmanfarman, Abol Saeedi, Ahmad Esfandiari, Mohammad Javadipour, Zenderudi and Tanavoli, Massoud Arabshahi, Manuchehr Yektaii, Sirak Melkonian, and Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam. Their works appeared in urban public spaces as well as in hotels and in the houses of the wealthy; needless to say, these works were void of any political content.

Many of the above-mentioned artists didn't follow the calling of their *Saqqakhaneh* colleagues to go back to their roots and stayed well within the established Western modernist tradition. In short, there is not a single thread that can connect all the various artistic activities that were taking place within the country in the 60s. Few among them, like Hanibal Alkas, harbored revolutionary sentiments but these never caught on until the late 70s. Because of the official support, the visual arts thrived. Tehran Contemporary Art Museum under the tutelage of Kamran Diba, who was a relative of the Queen as well as the Museum's architect, acquired works of notable Western artists like Alberto Giacometti, Umberto Boccioni, Frank Stella, René Magritte,



Hossein Zenderoudi,  
*Untitled*

<sup>5</sup> A water fountain, *saqqakhaneh* serves the thirsty in an arid climate. It is surrounded by mementos and objects offered as gifts. Most cities in Iran no longer have these fountains.

<sup>6</sup> According to the 60s visual artist Abel Saeedi in a personal conversation, April 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Notably the Constitutional Revolution of 1910 which ended with the strong-arm rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) and the coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosadeq (1950-53), which brought back Reza Shah's son Mohammad-Reza to the throne with the help of the US and the UK.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Conversation with Abel Saeedi, April 2010.

Joan Miró and Alexander Calder, and in this way built a reputation for the Iranian modern arts establishment.

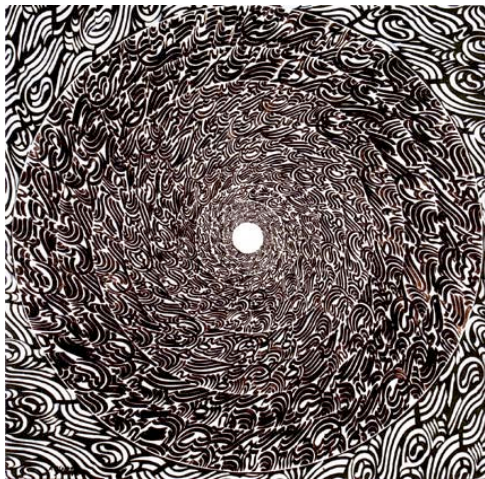
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Parviz Tanavoli, *Qafas-e Hich va Qafas-e Hich* [The Nothing Cage and the Cage of Nothing], 1976

The dominant narrative regarding the 60s as a revolutionary decade tends to overlook several developments that preceded and ran parallel to the decade's subversive potentials.

First, the youth rebellion owed a great deal of its intellectual vitality to the liberation movements inside and outside the West. The Third World "Project" unleashed a tremendous wave of dissent across the globe and against the violent legacy of colonialism and Cold War brinkmanship. Coming in the wake of the Indian Independence movement and inspired by the Gandhian non-violence philosophy, the three major leaders of the former colonies joined hands in the Javanese island of Bandung in 1955 to denounce the hegemony of the West.<sup>10</sup> They ultimately established a force that refused to abide by the bipolar mandates of the Cold War. It is this very force that, aided by Third World artists and intellectuals, inspired the rebel youth in Western countries to stage their own opposition to the power structure. Within the US, the Civil Rights Movement broke ground for a critical evaluation of racism and its relationship to the power structure upon which the Empire was built. It was Oakland, rather than Berkeley, that in the 60s became the site of the struggle against imperialism. Both the Civil Rights and the Third World Movements created a great wave of questioning the dominant ideological hold of Western nations.



Faramarz Pilaram, *Untitled*, 1972

Second, the 60s is thought of as a unique decade, unmatched in the way it unfurled its colors, the way it incited the creative energies of Western boys and girls, the way it fought the powers that be. We are told that the 60s was an irregularity, an anomaly, a schism in the history of Western Civilization. For American conservative politicians and scholars like Alan Bloom, Newt Gingrich, and Robert Borke, the 60s was infested with hedonism and bad faith. They scolded (and still do) its tendency to ignore the foundations of Western Civilization and they decry an educational system that fails to teach students classics of Western literature and arts. To them, the decade, and its remnants was a disgrace to high-browed values of the white man.



"Saqqakhaneh" Exhibition Poster, Qobad Shiva, 1977

This impression of the 60s as a Western wonder is not limited to conservative social scientists. Leftist and counterculture thinkers, too, saw it as an unprecedented decade in which idealism reigned supreme and the society moved towards challenging the capitalist order. They seldom, if ever, pay attention to the creative power and theoretical foundation of commercial culture. Through them, we also tend to overlook the global implications of a commercial apparatus that thirsts after channeling desires. The same cultural revolution that took place on the streets in the West in the 60s—anti-Vietnam War protest, sexual liberation, student rebellion, Rock 'n' Roll, Hippie-ism, Woodstock, avant-garde-ism, non-conformity, and rebelliousness—was echoed in the commercial world: "American business was undergoing a revolution in its own right during the 1960s," argues Thomas Frank in *the conquest of cool*, "a revolution in marketing practice, management thinking, and ideas about creativity."<sup>11</sup> Frank lists several books (*The Organizational Man*, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, *Up the Organization*) in which business

<sup>10</sup> Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 33-114.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Frank, *the conquest of cool*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 20.



Abol Saeedi, *Derakhtan* [Trees], 1973



Sirak Melkonian, *Untitled*, 1976



Manuchehr Yektaei, *Derakhtan Sarmast* [Drunken Trees], 1982

pundits laid out their manifesto: the thrust of New Business values and their antagonism to the fetid air of the 50s.

The 60s is the site of a major explosion in visual culture and nowhere is this more evident than in the commercial world. While we tended to locate the social movement within intellectual and artistic activities, European and American managers, graphic designers, and marketing agents were busy finding new ways to construct desires and to influence their audiences on the streets and in homes. Advertisement shifted gear to stage an uprising against mass society. New ads mocked and made fun of the Square culture. The "Cola Wars" between 1960-63 is emblematic of this shift in public relations. Pepsi cast itself as the soft drink for "those who think young... a modern enthusiasm for getting more out of life."<sup>12</sup> The 60s managers emphasize creativity, non-conformity, rebellion, individualism, being hip, and thinking young. TV sets comfortably lodged in suburban homes, ad agencies in full feather, the public is treated to an increasing number of visual registers whose power and impact remains yet to be analyzed by social scientists for whom the power and influence of the commercial culture is seldom a topic of interest.

Yet, it is simply enough to look at our surroundings and realize how successful the Marketing and Advertising Revolution of the 60s has been. "Design" has now become the ultimate art form and our visual space is inundated with signs and images that determine not only what we should buy but also how we should be. In a sense, selective values of the 60s (Think Young, United Colors, Do It!, the Revolution Will Not Be Televised) were kept alive by the new managers and ad agencies that built their edifice in the "Sweet 60s."

Of the few Iranian books written on the decade that found their way into the market, one is by journalist Faramarz Barzegar. *The Sociology of Hippie-ism* is a travel account of the writer to the US. "The strongest, most exciting, most colorful encounters and events, and at the same time the most peaceful and interesting social, political, artistic and literary movements took place in this decade. But there is a single thread that runs through all of these: a fresh, totally new, and socially active element that human civilization has never seen in its thousand years of evolution in such magnitude, diversity and power. And this element was called the 'youth movement' and included 55 to 75 per cent of the world and manifested itself under every circumstance."<sup>13</sup> The book is a singsong to the 60s not because it is void of strong, emotional criticism of the decade's anarchic tendencies, rootless rebelliousness, and fascination with the spiritual power of an imaginary East but because of it. Its overall tone is supportive of the youth and their struggle to unleash the creative powers of the Social. It reflects the views of such figures as Henri Lefebvre, Stanley Kauffmann, and Herbert Marcuse, the latter in a personal interview. It offers an enthused analysis of the musical *Hair*, the avant-garde production *Oh! Calcutta!* and a profile of 60s activists like Angela Davis, Jane Fonda, and Mohammad Ali (Clay). But nowhere do we see in the book a connection between commercial culture and visual culture. The same tendency exists today. The 60s for us is still the story of the counterculture.

*The Sociology of Hippie-ism* shows how fascination with the "youth culture" was in full swing in Iran during the same period. The youth culture inspired dozens of periodicals aiming to cater to the demands of a young population

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>13</sup> Faramarz Barzegar, *Jame'e-Shenasi Hippie-ism* ["Sociology of Hippie-ism"] (Tehran: Bongah Entesharat-e Arman, 1972), 3.

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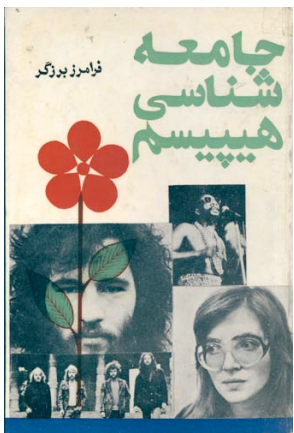
Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam, *Haras va Parvaz 7* [Fear and Flight 7]

whose government and notorious security apparatus did not tolerate the remotest forms of protest. Hence, many of the modernist artists of the decade in Iran found another way of expressing their concerns –through using a religious language that ultimately culminates in the 1979 Revolution. "In the cultural lexicon of Iran, the 'West' did not simply represent a higher model to be emulated, but an imposing presence on its national autonomy," maintains Shiva Balaghi, "Their works suggests that modernity in the Iranian context was a complex field of negotiation and accommodation –and not a simple act of imitation and mimicry."<sup>14</sup>

For the Iranian artists of today, the question of originality is still as strong a preoccupation as it was for those of the 60s, as is also the enigma of combating the Western ideological and commercial stranglehold. Three decades into a revolution that sought to establish a new identity for Iranians, artists are now trying to divest themselves of the religious symbolism that characterized the works of their predecessors. Almost all *Saqqakhaneh* artists of the 60s left the country after the Revolution.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the state is happy to open the country's doors to a rainbow of products that construct desires through an aggressive visual language. Our cityscape is studded with increasingly taller and wider billboards that flood our field of vision with impunity. In the midst of this circus of messages and visual assaults, the daunting task of artists is how to come up with a visual language that can be heard above the din of commercial culture and the clamor of originality.



Tehran Contemporary Art Museum, inaugurated in September 1976, architect Kamran Diba



Book cover, *Sociology of Hippiemism*, Farmarz Barzegar, 1972



Chelcheragh magazine cover, April 2010 [an appeal to the values of the sixties]



Zendegi-e Ideal [Ideal Lifestyle] magazine cover, April 2010 [generations of hip]

<sup>14</sup> Shiva Balaghi, "Iranian Visual Arts in 'The Century of Machinery, Speed, and the Atom': Rethinking Modernity," in *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution*, ed. Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert (New York: IB Tauris, 2002), 25.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Hossein Zenderoudi left Iran for France in 1960 and chose to remain there until today. Monir Farmanfarma left Iran immediately after the revolution and returned only a decade and a half later. Parviz Tanavoli migrated to Canada in 1982 and comes back to the country for special events.