

بهمن محمص را من از سالهای ۴۰ - ۱۳۳۱ می شناسم . بفرقتی مداوم .

DOCUMENT INTRODUCTION
در حضر و سفر . و این البته که محصل انسی است .
همین جوری هم دوستش دارم . چون گرم است . باسواد است و مهمتر ازینها
برای خودش «فنونمی» است . یک رشتی ایتالیایی شده ! و چنین «فنونم»
را گمان نمی کنم هیچکس دیگر - از هیچ جای دیگر - و در هیچ تاریخ
دیگر دیده باشد . اگر بشود از جزئی به کلی رسید حکایت محمص برای من
حکایت عالم نقاشی امروز است . این عالم پرهیاهو که در آن گنگ ها بیک
هرس تازه در آمد بین المللی گمان کرده اند سخن می گویند - یابامی می گذارند .
یابامی که نه بیغامی است و نه اگر لکنش را بگیری دیگر چیزی می ماند . و جالب
اینکه او خود حکایت نقاشی امروز ما هم هست . نهالی را از جایی
برداشتن و در جای دیگر از اقلیمی دیگر INTRODUCTION TO
JALAL AL-E AHMAD'S
"TO MOHASSESS, FOR THE WALL"
برش آوردن و برش گردانیدن . در این مقاله محمص را می شناسیم . از بس که اینجا
MOHAMMADREZA MIRZAEI

"To Mohassess, For the Wall"¹ is an essential document for understanding the adoption of modernism in Iranian art as well as the confrontation of Iranian artists and intellectuals with the West in the period after the US/British-orchestrated putsch against prime minister Mossadegh in 1953. Written for *Arash* magazine, its author is Jalal Al-e Ahmad, one of the most influential and charismatic Iranian intellectuals of the time, author of novels and short stories, and translator of French literature. Through the title of his article, Al-e Ahmad communicates that he is addressing himself to the Iranian painter Bahman Mohassess, one of a cohort of young Iranian painters—including, apart from Mohassess, Marcos Grigorian, Behjat Sadr, Mohsen Vaziri-Moghaddam, Manouchehr Sheybani, and Mansoureh Hosseini—who left Iran in the mid-1950s to study in Italy, and who returned home from the late 1950s to the early 1960s. However, his real addressees in this article are all Iranian modern painters.² The result is less a commentary on painting

1 Jalal-e Al-e Ahmad, "Bih Mohassess va Barāyih Dīvār," *Majalīh-yi Ārash*, no. 9 (Ābān 1343 [October/November 1964]): 86–91.

2 The title of the article is difficult to translate. It is a reference to the Persian expression *bi dar migam tā dīvār bishnavih* ("I tell it to the door so the wall can hear it"), suggesting that by addressing himself to Mohassess, Al-e Ahmad also, or even sometimes more especially, speaks to the other painters. However, when it comes to his sociopolitical critique, Al-e Ahmad is specific: "Mohassess has not fallen into the ditch. I say these words to the door for the wall to hear." This time explicitly, the other painters are the door, and Mohassess is the wall.

به محصص و برای دیوار

بهمن محصص را من از سالهای ۴۰ - ۱۳۳۱ می‌شناسم . بمعرفتی مداوم . در حضر و سفر . و این البته که محصل انسی است . اما علاوه برین انس همین جوری هم دوستش دارم . چون گرم است . باسواد است و مهمتر ازین‌ها برای خودش ((فنومنی)) است . یک رشتی ایتالیایی شده ! و چنین «فنومن» را گمان نمی‌کنم هیچکس دیگر - از هیچ جای دیگر - و در هیچ تاریخ دیگر دیده باشد . اگر بشود از جزئی به کلی رسید حکایت محصص برای من حکایت عالم نقاشی امروز است . این عالم پرهیاهو که در آن گنگ‌ها بیک مرس تازه درآمد بین‌المللی گمان کرده‌اند سخن می‌گویند - یاببامی می‌گذارند . یاببامی که نه بیغامی است و نه اگر لکتش را بگیری دیگر چیزی می‌ماند . و جالب تر اینکه او خود حکایت نقاشی امروز ما هم هست . نهالی را از جایی برداشتن و در جای دیگر از اقلیمی دیگر کاشتن و شاخ و برگ که کرد از نو درش آوردن و برش گردانیدن . ترس اینکه مبدا از سرما بسوزد یا مبدا در سایه دیگران بیژمرد . و این تازه خود نعمتی است . از بس که اینجا بیابانها قفر است . و از بس که هرلقمه خاکی زیادی برای نهالی دارد . درست یادم نیست کی دیدمش . اما میدانم کجا . در متن بز بزن اجتماعیات . جوانی بود و دم دست و پای ما می‌بلکید که بهمان زودی گمان میکردیم گرگ‌های باران دیده‌ایم . همانوقت‌ها که من تا شب «کندوکاو روزنامه‌ها» می‌کردم و او (باشریعت‌زاده و محمد تهرانی) تا صبح پلاکاد می‌کشید . برای تظاهرات فردا . که فردا شلوغ بشود و بریزیم و بریزند و هم روزنامه‌ها به غارت برود هم دسترنج شبانه آنها . و بعد مضی مامضی و چه صورتهای یادگاری از بزرگان آن قوم که بامضای اوهم اکنون در گوشه خانه‌ها همچو سکه اصحاب کهف از سکه افتاده است . گاهی رنگی

than a document that helps illustrate the difficult position of the Iranian intellectual in a society undergoing serious change.

The return of the aforementioned cohort of painters to Iran caused a shift in Iranian art: unlike the generation that had preceded them—including Jalil Ziapour and Ahmadi Esfandiari—for whom modernism had been an opportunity to take up a new artistic idiom that allowed them to domesticate (“Iranize”) modern Western painting, the younger group broke away from these efforts. While for Ziapour, Esfandiari, and their colleagues the preferred subject matter had been mosques and local neighborhoods, for these “Italian” painters the medium of painting itself replaced the Iranian setting. For example, the work of Behjat Sadr as well as Mohsen Vaziri Moghadam’s *Sand Paintings* are based on the artists’ own gestures and chosen material, to the point of total abstraction, belaboring the limitations of the medium in a way reminiscent of European Art Informel.

In “To Mohassess, For the Wall,” Al-e Ahmad demonstrates a critical attitude toward those among Iranian artists who subscribe to an imported modernism. He is especially concerned about what he terms the “stutter” in the work of these artists, by which he presumably means the absence of Iranian subjects and local narratives. With a certain sense of humor, Al-e Ahmad writes that such painters are painting doors and walls, by which he means that for him there is not any “movement,” “tremor,” “provocation,” or “ascent” in these works.

Three years before writing the present article, Al-e Ahmad had published one of the most influential texts about the political and cultural discourse prevalent in Iran during the 1960s. That work was entitled *Gharb’zadigī*, an idiomatic title that has been rendered in English as *Weststruckness*.³ Highly provocative and controversial, the treatise was banned immediately after its publication, and its political and cultural legacy has been hotly debated until today.⁴ While *Weststruckness* does not closely follow one particular ideological or philosophical model,⁵ it does

3 *Gharb’zadigī* has been inconsistently translated in English as “weststruckness,” “west-oxification,” and “occidentosis.” See the following translations: Al-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West*, trans. Paul Sprachman (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1981); Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1983); Al-e Ahmad, *Weststruckness*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1997).

4 Afshin Matin-Asgari provides an overview of these debates in “The Mid-Century Moment of Socialist Hegemony,” in *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 144–89.

5 Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western*, 175.

include criticisms inspired by Marxism: in Al-e Ahmad's point of view, Iranians were becoming mere consumers of Western products, from "iron ore" and "petroleum" to "music" and "mythology." According to the author, this leads to cultural alienation and, of course, economic dependence. Al-e Ahmad's Marxist focus helps his readers understand the implications of this dependence on consumption.⁶

In "To Mohassess, For the Wall," Al-e Ahmad shifts his analysis to painting, arguing that Iranian painters during the 1960s—including the cohort of Italian returnees—have merely repeated Western cultural processes and strategies instead of constructing Iranian ones.⁷

To make sense of their own work, according to Al-e Ahmad, painters "still depend on the word," by which he means that they need critics to write about their work by interpreting and analyzing it. Although he believes that in this way even the abstraction practiced by Iranian painters can become meaningful, the problem is that the referents for their work are unfailingly located in the West:⁸ "Where, give weight to this brush in the hands of these esteemed gentlemen? Could it be anywhere but the West?" That is why, for Al-e Ahmad, these modernist works do not "revive a memory"; they are devoid of any relation to Iranian "states of mind," and as such, they are little more than what Al-e Ahmad calls a "stutter."

What does Al-e Ahmad mean by this? Although some art historians have suggested that his invitation to Iranian painters to "return to their roots" can be reconciled with the tendency referred to in Iranian art history as *Saqqā'khānih*, in fact he explicitly criticized this school, seeing in it little more than an orientalizing shortcut for untalented artists and a bogus way of using modernism to portray a pre-modern society.⁹ Indeed,

6 To read a Marxist reading of *Weststruckness*, see Margaret Kohn and Keally McBride, "Westoxification/Detoxification: Anti-Imperialist Political Thought in Iran," in *Political Theories of Decolonization: Postcolonialism and the Problem of the Foundation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35–54.

7 For Al-e Ahmad, this repetition, rather than being a case of simple imitation, is not without its politico-cultural complexities: "Are you expected to remain a consumer of the West?," he asks. Being a "consumer" interestingly relates the fetishism for Western artistic processes to commodity fetishism.

8 Bavand Behpoor has noted this in "Bih Mohassess va Barāyih Dīvār," *Text and Image*, accessed March 16, 2019, http://reviews.behpoor.com/?page_id=6258.

9 The term *Saqqā'khānih* or *Saqqakhaneh*, in fact, "refers to the numerous public water reservoirs constructed in memory of the seventh-century Shī'ite martyrs who were denied water in Karbala." Fereshteh Daftari, "Redefining Modernism: Pluralist Art before the 1979 Revolution," in *Iran Modern*, ed. Fereshteh Daftari and Layla Diba (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 30. The works grouped under this label were fairly depoliticized and included a variety of approaches to religious, historical, or pop motifs that could represent an imagined past of Iran through a modernist visual language.

three years after writing the present article, in a review devoted to the fifth edition of the Tehran Biennial, Al-e Ahmad wrote that “foreign idiots have thought that any handwriting/script that is not Latin is some sort of a talisman, an exotic, primitive reminder of Africa, India, colonialism, and sexual instinct, etc.”¹⁰

For Al-e Ahmad, the problem with the modernists’ *weststruck* “stuttering”—ultimately, a form of disintegration—was that it opened the possibility that their work might be co-opted by the state, since the void it left behind could all too easily be filled with any number of interpretations: “The circumstances conditioning our times and the state apparatus will use your mute language and your eye-catching colors, devoid of substance, to render a device that fools the herd. And this is how history will judge you.” The context for Al-e Ahmad’s argument here is the Pahlavi regime’s radical program of rapid modernization, which in the area of the arts was systematically expanded, beginning with the establishment of the Tehran Biennial in 1958. In the catalog for the Biennial’s first edition, its director, Marcos Grigorian, optimistically (or naively) referred to the modernist project of the visual arts in Iran: “Now, we want to place the star of Iran’s name in the global sky of the Venice International Biennale so it can shine where it deserves to be, and collect a large number of honors at this grand art exhibition.”¹¹ Grigorian goes on to expand on the political implications of this development: “We owe the preparation of the Tehran Biennial and the effective participation in the Venice Biennale to the General Administration of Fine Arts, who, following the noble intentions of the Shah, have taken large strides to promote Iranian national art.”¹² The “noble intentions” of the Shah in promoting Iranian art nicely illustrate the politico-cultural impact of the West feared by Al-e Ahmad.

A few words should be said about Al-e Ahmad’s style in the translated article, which is difficult by any measure, and hard to translate. Influenced by the French writer Louis Ferdinand Céline, Al-e Ahmad often writes in staccato style, his sentences at times short and fragmented, and at other times maddeningly complex and labyrinthine.

10 Al-e Ahmad, *Kārnāmah’yi Sih Sālīh* (Tehran: Ravagh, 1974), 153. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

11 *Le Biennale de Téhéran* (Introduction to the First Tehran Biennial) (Tehran: Abyaz Palace, April–May 1958), exhibition catalog, 4.

12 *Ibid.*

His prose was so powerful indeed that the critic Reza Baraheni argued that “Al-e Ahmad, one of the main opponents of formalism in Iran, is one of the greatest formalists of the Persian language.”¹³ The paradox implied here—that Al-e Ahmad criticized the West in a style borrowed from Western writers—epitomizes the paradoxical situation of the Iranian intellectual after the 1953 coup, when anti-imperialist and anti-Western sentiments gained much traction in Iran. Keen to resist Westernization, intellectuals deployed their arguments under the direct tutelage of Western thinkers, and Al-e Ahmad’s article is no exception: while he criticizes Iranian painters for remaining “consumers of the West,” the only writer Al-e Ahmad cites in support of his arguments is Jean-Paul Sartre.

What gives the painter Bahman Mohassess such an important role in Al-e Ahmad’s eyes? On the one hand, they are friends and collaborators.¹⁴ As Al-e Ahmad states in the text, he had been instrumental in organizing Mohassess’s first solo show at the *Nirū-yi Sivvum* (Third Force) club, before Mohassess left Iran for Italy. Besides, he and Mohassess, who was also a translator of Italian and French literature into Persian, had many literary affinities.¹⁵ Apart from this, it was Mohassess’s legendary outspokenness, the fact that he was never afraid to speak his mind, that endeared the painter to Al-e Ahmad. As Al-e Ahmad writes, Mohassess “does not manufacture an aura for himself behind a veil of silence.” More important still is the fact that Al-e Ahmad considered Mohassess to be one of the few Iranian painters of the 1960s who had not been co-opted by the regime, “not fallen into the ditch.” Indeed, Mohassess himself, whose figurative style does not follow any Iranian visual tradition, went so far as to reject being part of “Iranian art” altogether, stating that working at an easel was “not an Iranian tradition.”¹⁶ And while Al-e Ahmad is critical of Mohassess’s

13 Hasan Zerehi, “Guftigū’yi Hasan Zirihi va Duktur Rizā Barāhini,” *Āvā’yi Tāb’īd*, accessed September 25, 2019, <http://avaetabid.com/?p=330>.

14 Al-e Ahmad mentions some of their collaborations in the text, such as Mohassess’s illustrations for Al-e Ahmad’s novella *Nūn wa al-Qalam* (*By the Pen*), trans. M. Ghanoonparvar (1961; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

15 For example, Mohassess translated Curzio Malaparte’s *The Skin* into Persian and changed its title to *Tars-i Jān* (*The Fear of Life*). Mohassess mentions in his introduction that the new title was chosen by Al-e Ahmad.

16 In an interview with Mohassess that was published in the same issue of *Arash* in which Al-e Ahmad’s article appeared, the painter expressed ideas that seem close to Al-e Ahmad’s: “In Iran . . . the dead end of abstraction lies in the fact that any [artist] who does not know other ways . . . can do abstraction. This is a problem.”

جلال آل احمد

نون و القلم

قصه

باجپان مجلس حکاکي از بهمن محمص



آبان ۱۳۴۰ شمسی

چاپ اول

تهران

work in any number of ways—referring to one of his most iconic paintings, *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (1964), by saying that Fifi sings a song that is “as meaningless as the song any Madame Fifi would sing,” he does see in Mohassess “a route to escape contemporary painting’s stutter”—the very stutter he identified in the work of the other “Italian” modernists. In a striking paradox, then, Al-e Ahmad credits a painter whose practice was, by his own estimate, fully “non-Iranian” with the potential power to form a local “Iranian” discourse.

At the end of his article, Al-e Ahmad issues an invitation to construct, think, and theorize “Iranian thought” and to create art rooted in Iranian culture for a (yet-to-be-created) Iranian market and audience: “Offer something, contribute to the goods that line this worldly market. Do not assume that the only buyers are tourists who, in failing to show, can make the market rot.” Crucially, his intention here is not to call for art’s commercialization; indeed, he criticizes those modernists who sell their work to foreign “tourists” or to the Iranian royal family: “alas, what a pity that you merely seek a buyer for your wares.” What he means to say is, rather, that if these painters have their eyes on the market, then the best thing they could do would be to create a market of their own. Al-e Ahmad’s tone becomes emotional when he warns Iranian painters that “the razzle-dazzle of the West occludes their vision” and asks them not to “allow their audience to look like a fool” by their pro-Western attitudes. Confessing that he doesn’t have an education as a painter, Al-e Ahmad makes it clear that his interest is not in creating a commercial art market as an end in itself—rather, he wants artists to create a community, an Iranian art world: “You do not wish to see the world from my eyes because you hold a grudge. But I wish to see the world from your eyes in addition to my own.” Here it becomes evident that the writer does not see himself in the role of a teacher who issues prescriptive lessons to the painters—he emphasizes this by asking them not “to place [their] brush, in homage, at the feet of local colors and tradition”—but rather more as a father figure. According to him, both intellectuals and painters need to see the world through each others’ eyes to be able to create something truly Iranian. That is how he believes they will together create a local environment—a market—that could support them both financially and intellectually.

“To Mohassess, For the Wall” offers a crucial window into the adoption of Western-style modernism by Iranian painters during the

1960s, and into how an “insider” intellectual such as Al-e Ahmad evaluated the modernization of Iranian art before the background of what he perceived as the critical neglect of Iranian traditions. With his highly perceptive grasp of Cold War imperatives, Al-e Ahmad understood like few others the important role modernized art played for both the Pahlavi regime and its Western allies. In this sense, his article also offers a rare glimpse of the gulf that separated the domestic from the foreign view of modern art in Iran.