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# Iranian Art Lovers Await Accord's Benefits

Some experts are betting on a surge of interest and prices for art

By **KELLY CROW**

July 17, 2015

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Monir Shahroudy , Untitled, 1980 *PHOTO: MONIR SHAHROUDY*

On Saturday, Tehran art dealer Nazila Noebashari plans to open a second branch of her Aaran Gallery in a renovated house with high ceilings and a garden—a “magical” expansion that she said coincides with the continuing diplomatic effort to restore ties between Iran and the world. “Before, it made no sense to grow,” Ms. Noebashari said.

As world powers reach a nuclear deal with Iran, the art-world elite is betting that the isolated country will see a surge of interest and prices for Iranian art.

Collectors in the U.S. and beyond have been eyeing, and buying, Iranian art for years, thanks to a little-known exception to Iran’s economic sanctions that allows visitors to buy art there because it’s considered a cultural asset (unlike, say, carpets).

Now, Michael Jeha, managing director for Christie’s Middle East, said that he expects global art lovers to throng to Tehran’s studios and galleries if it becomes easier to travel and shop there. The diplomatic deal still faces many challenges before it can be fully implemented. “Iran has such a long history and tradition of making strong art,” he said, “and collectors around the world, especially in the U.S., will feel more comfortable buying it once there’s less stigma and hassle.”

For decades following Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution, U.S. collectors wishing to visit Iran

needed a travel license from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which gave out a handful of licenses a year to those seeking to visit Iran and bring home "informational materials." Yet once they arrive, Americans still aren't allowed to pay for art with a U.S. bank check or credit card, compelling some collectors to carry cash or transfer funds using local intermediaries.

Ms.

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#### MORE ON THE IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

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- At a Glance: Iran and Global Business (<http://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2015/07/14/the-iran-deal-and-global-business-at-a-glance/>)

Noebashari said that a Belgian collecting couple who recently visited her gallery paid for a piece using the help of their cousin who lived in Iran. "If you want to buy a \$20,000 work of art, not everyone happens to have a local cousin," Ms. Noebashari said.

Collectors have found other ways to meet Iranian dealers and artists at art fairs in Dubai or in Azerbaijan, said New York dealer Leila Heller. Others buy art by Iranian emigrants who have clustered in major cities like Paris or Los Angeles.

Thanks to the increased interest from global buyers, prices for Iranian art have climbed sharply in the past two years. The ranks of well-known collectors of Iranian art include retired advertising executive Charles Saatchi and philanthropist Nasser Khalili, both based in London. The wealthy Iranian diaspora has also helped to fuel the careers of rising stars like Barbad Golshiri, a video artist who has filmed Iranian schoolgirls disappearing into a blue curtain, and Abbas Akhavan, who makes playful, garden installations.

Currently, prices for works by living artists like Rokni Haerizadeh, Reza Derakshani and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian can swing between \$40,000 and \$400,000 apiece.

Iranian modern and contemporary art is also enjoying a revival among museums. From Qatar to Washington, D.C., institutions say that they are starting to rank Tehran higher

on their wish lists of places to scout for new art. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art takes collectors on a trip to Iran every year now, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is taking collectors on a 17-day "Splendors of Iran from North to South" trip this November; tickets cost nearly \$10,000 apiece.

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## MORE ICONS

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Institutional interest is growing, in part because Iranian art embodies a 3,000-year-old cultural mix of Persian, Islamic and Asian influences and motifs. Calligraphy, geometric patterns, political and social commentary as well as lively figures painted into miniature paintings—all have found a place within Iranian art. Sam Bardaouil, a Munich-based curator who often organizes shows by Middle Eastern artists, said that the country's well-established film scene has also stoked a vibrant generation of Iranian photographers and video artists.

Shirin Neshat, age 58, is arguably Iran's best-known contemporary artist. Born in Qazvin, Iran, and now based in New York, she earned a reputation in the 1990s for her "Women of Allah" series, in which she explored issues of identity and militancy by taking photos of women whose hands and faces were covered in Persian calligraphy, like henna. Last October, Sotheby's sold her 2001 video piece, "Passage," for \$269,000, a record price for the artist at auction. Washington's Hirshhorn Museum is exhibiting "Shirin Neshat: Facing History," through Sept. 20.

Ms. Neshat already enjoys an international following, but Mr. Jeha and others predict plenty of other Iranian artists could see a price bump in coming months. One to watch: 78-year-old sculptor Parviz Tanavoli, who splits his time between Tehran and Vancouver.

Mr. Tanavoli is best known for taking the calligraphic script for a Farsi word that means "nothing" and transforming its undulating shape into whimsical bronze or fiberglass

sculptures. In 2008, Christie's sold his 1975 bronze, "Oh, Persepolis," for \$2.8 million, a record for a sculpture by the artist. Last October, Christie's sold an untitled painting from 1962 by the artist for \$365,000, six times its low estimate.

Iranian contemporary artists tend to veer between lyrical abstraction and tougher work that overtly explores issues of sexuality and political freedom, the latter being subject to censorship. Nicky Nodjoumi, who is based in Brooklyn, has painted wry images of Iranian religious leaders cavorting with nude women. Newsha Tavakolian has photographed transvestites living in Tehran.

Novice buyers should beware of fakes, though. Shiva Balaghi, a Brown University cultural historian who helped New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum mount a survey of Ms. Farmanfarmaian's mirror-shard sculptures earlier this year, said that she expects to see a proliferation of fake Iranian modern and contemporary artworks once the market opens up to the world. Iran also forbids exports of some centuries-old pieces as well, so newcomer collectors should consult with art advisers before splurging.

One bonus: Artists in Iran could find it easier to get visas to attend their own openings or join show-related lectures abroad—a difficult task now. "I go to lectures now, and sometimes all the artists on the panel have to show up on Skype," Ms. Balaghi said.

### **Corrections & Amplifications:**

**New York art dealer** Leila Heller said collectors seeking Iranian art often gather in nearby art hubs like Dubai. An earlier version of this article mischaracterized her statement and described such gatherings as legal loopholes, implying collectors tried to sidestep economic sanctions against Iran. In addition, cultural historian Shiva Balaghi said she expects Iran to see a proliferation of fake modern and contemporary art if sanctions are lifted. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said she was referring to Persian antiques. (July 19, 2015)

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