PICTURES FROM A REVOLUTION
The 1979 Iranian Uprising

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A tripartite exhibit of fine arts, photography, and revolutionary posters, Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture, unfolds to define the concept of a revolution as a 180-degree turn. More specifically, the exhibit brings together images and words to crystallize and define the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Revolution. The first part of the exhibit places the accent on the modern fine arts of Iran. While this is all pre-revolution artwork, it represents a revolutionary step from traditional miniature painting and the classical style of the Iranian master painter Kamal-al-Molk. The exhibit presents the painting and sculptures of graduates of the newly established Fine Arts Academy, Tehran University, and independent painters, including: Hossein Zenderoudi (1937–), Faramarz Pilaram (1938–83), Mansoor Ghandriz (1935–65), Parviz Tanavoli (1937–), Sohrab Sepehri (1928–80), Behjat Sadr (1924–), Monir Shahroury Farmanfarmaian, Siah Armajani (1939–), Marcos Grigorian (1925–), and Esmail Tavakoli (also known as Masht Esmail, 1923–94).

While the country suffered various social and political illnesses during the pre-1979 era, the fine arts experienced the reverse: they flourished under the Shah and Queen Farah Diba’s auspices. The artists were able to express themselves non-critically of the regime, but with open doors to religion, spirituality, and apolitical subjects; if they did not criticize the Shah or his regime, they were free to create as they wished. The body of work presented is diverse, yet linked by several outstanding features and themes, in particular the use of words as images and an abstract expression of Islam, particularly mysticism.

The usage of words to create images can be seen most notably in the works of Hossein Zenderoudi and Siah Armajani. In his The Sun and the Lion (1960) Zenderoudi uses four colors, calligraphy, and numerology to recreate a sun and a lion. This used to be the coat of arms of Iran during the Shah’s reign; it could be seen
everywhere, from school books to the flag. However, for Zenderoudi these elements had spiritual references, rooted in Sufism, as well. [Fig. 1] A more informal, and perhaps even mystical, usage of calligraphy can be seen in his *Four Directions of an Artist* (1964), in which Zenderoudi once again uses only calligraphy of both words and letters of the alphabet to create an abstract black-and-white shape. [Fig. 2] Similarly, in Armajani’s *Prayer for the Sun* (1962), the surface of the canvas shows two spheres. [Fig. 3] Looking closely, one finds that calligraphy is etched, hardly visible to the eyes, in the two spheres. In viewing these works, we are left with many questions: What do the shapes represent? In Zenderoudi’s work, we note that the alphabet extends from the center to the edges—why? Can the calligraphy be decoded, or is it intentionally a secret? Why is it so subtle, almost invisible? In fact, very few people are able to decode the text. Both artists used calligraphy not only to create shape and forms, but also as a prayer, at once visible and invisible to the viewers’ eyes.¹

Yet, some of the pieces containing images from words do contain more recognizable points of reference. Zenderoudi’s *The Hand* (1960–61) can be seen as representing the three Abrahamic faiths, all of which exist in Iran: the hand belongs to the Shi’ite Moslem tradition, the star of David to the Judaic tradition, and the baptismal bowl to the Christian tradition. The sculpture not only demonstrates the three faiths, but, in linking them with one another, suggests the dynamic of inter-faith dialogue and exchange. [Fig. 4]

Although a substantial emphasis in the first part of the exhibit is placed upon *paintings with words* gaining shapes and meaning of their own—religious or non-religious—the exhibit also displays paintings that offer the viewer *paintings without words*. Painters in this category include Parviz Tanavoli, Marcos Grigorian, Faramarz Pilaram, Behjat Sadr, and Sohrab Sepehri. Among them *Trees* (1970) by Sepehri particularly stands out. Looking at this poet/painter’s portrayal of bare trees, with bold strokes of brown and a touch of blue, one cannot but recall minimalist modern Japanese painting, in which with a few brush strokes a painting is created out of a few letters of the alphabet. Sepehri’s painting has the same simple bold strokes, but it does not have letters or words. It is not communicating through words, but through a reference: an arrow pointing to his poetry. Here again, one cannot help but recall his poetry—a poetry that oftentimes personified a state of loneliness and emotional exile. In *The Sound of Water’s Footsteps*, for example, he writes: “Life is a feeling of alienation which a migrating bird has.” [Fig. 5]

The exhibit also displays numerous sculptures, among them, Tanavoli’s *Heech* (1972) and Esmail Tavakkoli’s *The Goat* (1973). Tanavoli’s *Heech* uses the three letters of the alphabet—“he,” “ye,” and “che”—to create the word “heech,” which translates as *emptiness* or *nothingness*. This nothingness can be seen as the mystical stage of being emptied out and reaching a level of *nothingness* where the material world is no longer emphasized, and the spiritual takes its place at the center of the arena. Reaching this state of *nothingness* is a long process; it doesn’t come overnight. This journey and state of nothingness can best be seen in poetry: in *The Mathnawi*
[Fig. 1] Hossein Zenderoudi, *The Sun and the Lion*, 1960.

[Fig. 2] Hossein Zenderoudi, *Four Directions of an Artist*, 1964.

[Fig. 3] Siah Armajani, *Prayer for the Sun*, 1962.

[Fig. 4] Hossein Zenderoudi, *The Hand*, 1960–61.

[Fig. 5] Sohrab Sepehri, *Trees*, 1970.

[Fig. 6] Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech*, 1972.

[Fig. 7] Esmail Tavakoli (Masht Esmail), *The Goat*, 1973.

Figs. 1–7 Courtesy Grey Art Gallery/New York University.
of Rumi (Maulana Jalalu’ d-din Rumi, otherwise known as Molavi) or in Attar’s Conference of the Birds. [Fig. 6]

The Goat by Tavakoli (better known as Masht Esmail) is particularly striking. Whereas in the Western tradition, particularly in the Christian tradition, goats are looked down upon and ostracized (in Christianity the sheep are separated from the goats, who are hell bound), the contrary exists in the Iranian tradition: sheep and goats are both regarded as equals, and the goat in many ways is regarded as a stronger and more prominent animal in the wandering lives of shepherds and nomads. Esmail had no formal training in the arts; he worked as the janitor in the artists’ studio, and when the studio would close for the day, he would work on his sculptures. Looking at the goat closely we find an emphasis on linearity of forms with striking resemblance to Picasso’s line drawing and Giacometti’s thin, tall figures. The goat alone, as magnificent and beautiful as it is in its creation, nonetheless suffers, as in Sepehri’s works, from loneliness and alienation. The goat has no companion—no man, no shepherd, no goat—and yet in his loneliness he stands strong and magnificent. [Fig. 7]

Supplementing the pre-1979 word-image synthesis in fine arts, the second part of the exhibit shifts its focus to the black-and-white pre-/post-1979 photographs of Abbas. His photographs document the revolution. In doing so, they have also gone beyond this task: they have defined a revolution and in many cases have become icons representing its force and success.

In his book Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes examines the nature of photography and points out two definitive attributes in photographs: the stadium, the intellectual understanding of the image, and the punctum, a subtle element in a photograph that creates an emotional rupture. Defining the stadium, Barthes writes: “It is by stadium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in stadium) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.” In contrast to the stadium, he defines the punctum: “The second element will break (or punctuate) the stadium. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of stadium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.” Barthes goes on to add: “A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” The combination of these two elements—the stadium and the punctum—allows the photograph to communicate to its viewers in both an intellectual manner, as well as in an emotional/spiritual manner.

Abbas’s photographs are undoubtedly about a revolution (the stadium of the photo), but each photo highlights a new side, a new perspective, a new part of the stadium (the revolution) being photographed. Intellectually we understand the scene, the
content: the stadium is clear and speaks loudly: the king, the generals, the crowds, the demonstrations, and the like. What makes the images powerful, however, and capable of reaching and touching us, is the subtle detail in the image (the punctum) which disturbs the consciousness and the emotion. After all, a revolution means a disturbance; it is a 180-degree turn and an articulate pain. The revolution cannot be defined without the pain, nor can it be defined without an understanding of the conflict: what is it that needs to be turned around, revolved, overthrown, toppled, and uprooted?

While we often see the revolution as a single, momentary event in time and history, the beauty of Abbas's photographs is that the revolution is re-defined by its elements, by its chords and pieces. The sequence of photographs shows us, take by take, shot by shot, moment by moment, an explosion into many pieces of this singular moment called a revolution. The viewer is now invited to put the pieces back together, like a jigsaw puzzle. In this visual manner, the spectator begins to understand what a revolution is; what are its pieces, and what, if any, are (or have become) its icons.

1971: The exhibit starts off by defining the elements of the conflict—the two poles of the revolution—and their co-existence with one another. In the first photo, we see a group of young students studying for their exams inside a mosque. Some are sitting down, others are walking around. Regardless, they all have their shoes off—a sign of reverence to the home of God. The mosque is not only a holy space, but one in which sacredness is observed in a variety of forms and rituals. The photograph on the surface does not show a conflict or an irony, but with close examination, the punctum—the element which stands out and punctures the stadium—becomes apparent. A youth, sitting on the carpet, with his shoes off, studying with his friend, has a cigarette in his hands: the tension between the sacred and the profane, the real and the symbolic, holiness and pseudo-holiness. Which “man of God” would allow himself to be smoking in a mosque? By this time, everyone knew about cigarettes (a Western invention in contrast to the water-pipe) and the “Marlboro Man,” and Iran even produced its own cigarettes. A small detail in the photo, but a good revelation of what contradictions were present in the society. [Fig. 8]

1971: The next picture shows the royal family amidst their people: the Shah—the “King of Kings,” the “Light of Lights”—is dressed in his fine, haute couture clothes, and his empress is ahead of him, smiling, greeting, and playing the host among the people. While dressed in the most high-fashion, modern manner, she and the king are surrounded by common people who have the basics of an underdeveloped country. Note, for example, the costume of the young girl; it is plain and unassuming. The picture reveals the royal family in good standing and “well-liked” by the people. Behind the sacred king, however, lies the monstrous king: one who is to be overthrown. The punctum in this photo is the smile: unaware of the future, the royal smile signifies happiness and contentment with the current state of affairs, without any doubt or suspicion. [Fig. 9]
[Fig. 8] *Men in a Mosque*, 1971. Walking, studying . . . and smoking.

[Fig. 9] *The Shah and the Empress*, 1971. King or monster?

[Fig. 10] *Officers of the Shah*, 1977. Napoleon resurrected?

[Fig. 11] *Hairdressing Salon*, 1977. The perfect clash/glance in one scene.

[Fig. 12] *Two Men Praying Outside*, 1979. Why are they kneeling in front of oil refineries?

[Fig. 13] *Wrecked Car Amid Grazing Sheep*, 1978. Why is the shepherd boy with his stick sitting on top of the car’s roof?

[Fig. 14] *Young Woman at Anti-Shah Demonstration*, 1978. The predicament of the revolution?
[Fig. 15] *Men Burning a Portrait of the Shah*, 1978. The spark set a fire.

[Fig. 16] *Khomeini*, 1979. What is hidden in the portrait of the Grand Ayatollah, the leader?

[Fig. 17] *Women Welcome the Ayatollah Khomeini Upon His Return from Exile*, 1979. The crowd.

[Fig. 18] *General Rabimi (top right) and Three Generals Executed after a Secret Trial*, 1979. The smell of a revolution.

[Fig. 19] *The Body of Prime Minister Hoveyda at the Morgue*, 1979. The smirk: what is he smiling at?

[Fig. 20] *Armed Militia Outside the US Embassy Where Diplomats are Held Hostage*, 1979. The hand of the statue of liberty is also raised.

[Fig. 21] *First Anniversary of the Revolution*, 1980. What is the machine gun doing there—on a celebratory day like this?

Abbas photographs, figs. 8–21, Courtesy Magnum Photos, New York.
1977: The next picture, perhaps, is more revealing of the Shah’s regime in that it depicts the Shah’s generals. The attitude of the king is mirrored by his sub-commanders and they too take pleasure in the sharing of power. The *punctum* in this photograph is the subtle, yet highly articulate, pose of the general with his hand placed halfway in the side of his military outfit—a pose that Napoleon adopted. Who is this general to stand as such? [Fig. 10]

1977: The two poles, tradition and modernity, are now brought together in a group of pictures. In the hair salon, modern women and a male employee emulate Western ways and fashion. The worker stands in the background and gazes at them. Beneath the Western clothing, is the man a traditional man or a modern one? The gaze of the worker is perfectly aimed at the women at the hair-dressing station, who seemingly are blowing a kiss: the clash of the gaze, between the openness of the women and the veiled gaze of the worker (non-suspicious, yet so perfectly aimed and angled at the three women) defines the *punctum* of the photograph. [Fig. 11]

1979: If there has ever been a doubt with respect to the clash of modernity and tradition in the pre-revolution era, this picture presents a magnificent metaphor for it: two men are praying, their shoes and weapons off to the side. In front of them are two oil refinery towers, blowing out smoke and fire. This sets up the visible reality of tradition and modernity. What makes the image a powerful metaphor is that the photograph captures the prayer of the two men right at the moment when they are bowing down. With the two men bowed down before the two refineries, the *punctum* becomes a disturbing question: does the picture represent praying towards the holy city of Mecca or submission to modernity? Why would anyone kneel in front of oil refineries? [Fig. 12]

1978: A third picture acting as a metaphor to show this conflict is one in which a broken-down car is surrounded by a group of sheep and a shepherd, foreshadowing the victory of tradition over Westernization and its decadence. The hood of the car is crushed, and the car looks like an open mouth, standing before the grazing sheep. Is the car about to devour the sheep? No: the sheep have already won the battle; the shepherd boy is sitting comfortably on top of the car’s roof. The photo as a metaphor speaks loudly for itself, yet its *punctum* is in a very small detail: the wooden stick that the shepherd boy is holding presses on the industrialized metal car. [Fig. 13]

1978: An outstanding picture of a 1978 protest, an anti-Shah demonstration, reveals to us the hidden predicament of men and women of the revolution. While the united crowd of men stands on a raised street, a woman stands alone dressed in a black chador. She is surrounded by emptiness, save a few scraps of paper on the street. Are men and women to be separated with the revolution? Is this segregation a condition of the revolution, or is it by choice? Both: the people chose an Islamic Republic as their next form of government. The *punctum* here is the contrast of one woman with thousands of men: the visible gender segregation, even prior to the success of the revolution. [Fig. 14]
1978: Throughout, the photographs illustrate the clash of two opposite poles around which the revolution took place. The dominance of one side—Shah/Westernization/Modernity—over the other—the traditional/the religious/the Third World—is explicit, and yet in each picture the punctum constantly points to a strong clash and a potential for change: a revolution. The 1978 photograph of the burning of the picture of the Shah and the royal family by an enthusiastic mob in the streets of Tehran finally scores the start of such a change. The punctum lies in the faces of the mob: none of the faces are angry, nor are they in the process of shouting slogans. The mob is simply burning the picture of the king and the royal family, and as if it were a family barbecue, they are taking pleasure in it. In the background we see a sign on the building: “Tehran Bank.” As the picture of the Shah and his family burns—a signal for the start of the revolution—we wonder where did all the money from the oil go? Whose pockets, whose bank? [Fig. 15]

1979: the year of the revolution. The most notable icon displayed in the exhibit is the stark charismatic portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini, whose return to Iran in 1979 after the departure of the Shah marked the revolution’s success. The image was not only used as an icon of “celebration,” “victory,” “reverence,” and “gift of God to the country,” it was accepted and recognized throughout the world as an icon of the revolution itself. What defines this portrait by Abbas is the high contrast of the white beard and the tall illuminated forehead against the black shawl and turban he is wearing. The right eye has a piercing look, directly shooting out of the picture and into the unknown. The punctum of the photo, however, is elsewhere; it is the left eye, which is hidden in shadow, underneath the eyebrows. What is this eye hiding? What is going to happen next? Is he in the dark like everybody else as to what is to come, or does he have an inkling of it which he withholds? The portrait was no longer a picture; it was worshiped by millions all over the country and even other parts of the world. [Fig. 16]

February 3, 1979: In this picture, the raised fists and raised arms now signify not a protest, but a welcome, a greeting, a salutation. The crowd of women welcomes the Ayatollah, but the crowd is composed of one person, a unity of persons. It is both millions of people, but at the same time, it is one entity. In his book, Crowds and Power, Elias Canetti describes the crowd phenomenon best when he writes: “Density and equality become one and the same. In the end, there appears to be a single creature dancing, a creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms, all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose. When their excitement is at its height, these people really feel as one, and nothing but physical exhaustion can stop them.” The punctum here is the crowd as one, the crowd in one uniform, black, chador-draped, the crowd crawling along as a black centipede. [Fig. 17]

February 15, 1979: General Rahimi along with three other generals are executed and we see their bodies in the morgue. The photograph depicts the violence of the revolution. We see the dead body but we cannot see the bullet marks. How were they shot? With one bullet, or many? We’ll never know. Did they have wives and
children? What became of them? Disturbing as it is, the punctum of the photo lies in the scarves that cover the noses and mouths of the revolutionary guards: the revolution has a smell and taste. It has a smell, a stench, of death that stinks along with bacteria and microbes floating around in the air much like a plague. When we think of a revolution, we do not often associate it with smell, yet it is there: blood, dried blood, cold blood, blood mixed with dirt on the streets, and blood mixed with bitter tears. [Fig. 18]

April 1979: Ex-prime minister Hoveyda is executed. To appease the anger of the people, the Shah had removed Hoveyda from power and imprisoned him. But the anger and the thirst for vengeance was not quenched. Hoveyda, as an enemy of the revolution, is executed by the revolutionaries. In this photo we see his dead body surrounded by three revolutionaries, who are looking at him. The punctum lies in the smirk of the young revolutionary with the machine gun: it indicates pleasure, contentment, and pride. The smile and the machine gun held by the young revolutionary combine to hint that more executions and violence lie ahead. To this effect, in his book Violence and the Sacred, René Girard points out: “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the last blow, and reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever being reached.” Execution after execution was to follow. [Fig. 19]

December 1979: This photograph focuses on a section of the crowd, standing still, with raised fists and open mouths, undoubtedly shouting slogans. Why are they standing still as opposed to moving forward? Is not a revolution about movement? Once again, Canetti decodes the phenomenology of a crowd into four aspects that define it. He writes:

1. The crowd always wants to grow. There are no natural boundaries to its growth.
2. Within the crowd there is equality. This is absolute and indisputable and never questioned by the crowd itself. It is of fundamental importance and one might even define a crowd as a state of absolute equality. A head is a head, an arm an arm, and differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant. It is for the sake of this equality that people become a crowd and they tend to overlook anything which might detract from it.
3. The crowd loves density. It can never feel too dense. Nothing must stand between its parts or divide them; everything must be the crowd itself.
4. The crowd needs a direction. It is in movement and it moves towards a goal. The direction, which is common to all its members, strengthens the feeling of equality. A crowd exists so long as it has an unattained goal.

The crowd moves to bring about the revolution and stands still when victory has been attained. Thus, not only is the crowd in motion towards the revolution part of the revolution, it is the revolution itself. The raised fists, which have become an icon of protest, finally stand still. Here the crowd is still: it has attained what it wanted. The irony in this photograph is its direction; it takes place in front of the American
[Fig. 22] *There is no other god but God*, 1979. Photo: Courtesy Grey Art Gallery.


[Fig. 24] *Footprints over a smashed crown*, 1978–79. Photo: Courtesy collection of Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.

[Fig. 25] Morteza Momayez: *Poster depicting fists as tulips*, 1978–79. Photo: Courtesy collection of Nicky Nodjoumi.

[Fig. 26] *Graffiti Wall*, c. 1979. Photo: Courtesy Grey Art Gallery.
Embassy where the hostages were held. The punctum here lies not in the crowd, not in their slogans, but in their stationary posture that mirrors the subtle silhouette of the Statue of Liberty, with her arms raised in the same position as the protestors, on a wall behind the scene. Note the motorcycle in the photograph: as anti-Westernization is welcomed, the West continues to be part of everyday life. [Fig. 20]

February 11, 1980: On the first anniversary of the revolution, we can barely see the buildings through the dust and the celebrating crowd. Amid the crowd, we find a man who has fainted and is being carried by the rest, and the white hats of two officers, affirming the unity of people and those in a position of authority. Though the picture is one of celebration, it is not so far from one of a revolution, with crowds and open mouths shouting slogans. Are they shouting slogans of victory and celebration, or are they shouting slogans of the revolution? The picture does not make it clear, thereby rendering the distinction between the two blurry. What we can clearly see from the photograph, however, is that the celebration of the revolution is a re-enactment of the revolution itself. The punctum lies in the lower left hand corner of the photograph: there is a machine gun. What is it doing there on a celebratory day like this? [Fig. 21]

In the final section of the exhibit, the posters, the icons of the revolution, take both a symbolic and a literal form, once again using both words and images to convey their message. Alienation, loneliness, a distanciation from society—all themes which may have existed prior to the revolution, in both poets and painters—have now been replaced by a more heightened and hyperbolic representation. The representation in the posters is aimed at the present: the present moment, what led to the present moment, and where we go from here.

In the posters, we find images of blood or fists in the air along with writing. Sometimes, the writing is religious verses such as “La elaha ellah-Allah” (“The is no other god but God”), with the calligraphy in white against black silhouettes of raised fists against a uniform red sky. In other posters, we find affirmation of the revolution, such as “Women during Revolution,” depicting two and a half women in black chadors, and one in a uniform red covering. The poster is to demonstrate the importance of women during the revolution, yet it contains two paradoxes: on the one hand, women are required to cover themselves (oppression) and yet they too can shed blood, like men (equality to men). [Figs. 22 and 23]

Another poster declares “Onward and forward toward the real democracy, the Islamic Republic Democracy” with red footprints walking over a crushed crown and leading the way—one might ask, is it going to be a bloody path? Others present revolutionary slogans with an accent on death. Some present the glorified image of death: “From the blood of our youth tulips (red in their coloring) have sprouted,” meaning that past shed blood is what has brought us victoriously to the present (with the underlying note of “Let us not forget it”). Other posters are directed at the
“enemy”: “Death to the Shah, Death to America.” [Figs. 24, 25, and 26] A year after the revolution, when Iran went to war with Iraq, the slogan “Death to Saddam” was added to the list.

The posters of the revolution soon became a large part of everyday language: everyone identified with the images, since they themselves had participated in a demonstration with raised fists, or they knew someone who knew someone who was a victim of some sort, if not killed. Blood shed and tears shed were the predication of many. Beyond appealing to the people, and serving the revolution through words and images, both the slogans and texts, as well as the images, were all consumed with appetite, the common ones being “From the blood of our youth tulips have sprouted” and “Death to the Shah, America, and Saddam.” In a short time, posters became popular icons that represented the new regime and the new ideals: anti-American sentiments, anti-Western sentiments, and a return to tradition and religion through a neo(Islamic) patriotism.

For anyone who has lived through the revolution, this exhibit acts as a reminder of the early days of the uprising, the overthrow, and the replacement of the old regime with the new one. Each work echoes a moment of this pre-/post-section of history. In contrast, for those who did not witness the rupture taking place, the exhibit provides a unique sampling of “what a revolution is,” or “what a revolution can be,” with a clear and specific emphasis placed upon the “1979 Iranian (Islamic) Revolution.” No doubt, neutral viewers will be left with images and words engraved in their minds, which in their totality will define, or rather (re)define what “revolution” means.

NOTES

1. The majority of Persian mysticism is Sufism, which is rooted in Shi’ite Islam. As with many other forms of mysticism, some teachings of the masters are kept secret, and therefore are invisible and unknown to those outside the order.


3. Ibid., p. 27.


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