I have known Bahman Mohassess since the 1951–53 years. For his unwavering generosity, at home and abroad. Naturally this breeds a kind of familiarity. But beyond that, I just like him. He’s warm, educated, and, above all, a “phenomenon” unto himself. An Italianized rashti, if you can believe it! I would wager that no one—from any other time or place—has ever witnessed such a “phenom.” If we are able to arrive at the whole from a part, then, for me, Mohassess’s story is the story of the world of painting today—that world of fanfare, where mutes figure they can speak or leave behind messages in their newly concocted international Morse code. A message (payām) that is not even a dispatch (payghām) and of which, when robbed of its stutter, nothing remains. More interesting, even, he is the story of our painting today: the uproot-
ing of a sapling, transplanting it to a different climate, and then, just as it starts to bloom, uprooting it once again and returning it, fearing it might burn from the cold or wither away under the shadows cast by others. And this in itself is a blessing, insomuch as the plains here are wild and each morsel contains abundant soil.

I do not remember exactly when I first saw him, but I know where. It was in the midst of social unrest. He was a young cub who lollygagged at our feet; we took ourselves for seasoned old wolves. I would sit from dawn to dusk “exploring the newspapers,” and he would stay up until morning (alongside Shariatzadeh and Mohammad Tehrani) drawing placards for the next day’s protest to ensure as much tumult as possible. We would attack and they would counterattack. Both the newspapers would be looted and so too would their nightly toil. And then, what was past was past. . . . What monumental portraits of the social elite, bearing his signature, still lie discarded in the corners of private homes, having fallen out of circulation like the coin of the Seven Sleepers (āshāb-ul-kaḥf). They were sometimes in color, often black-and-white and pen-and-ink (stāh qalam). Alas, back then, everyone was in a rush to write history! And those paintings (pardīh-hā), even if they did not serve any other purpose, at the very least occasioned his dress rehearsal (stāh mashq).

It was during these two years that we organized his first painting exhibition at the “Third Force” (Nīrū-yi Sīvum) club. Still lifes, flowers, portraits, along these lines. With a minimum of visitors and little attention paid. There was scant time to spare for fun back then. When the waters that powered the mill ceased to flow (āb-hā az āsīyāb uftād) and opportunities to have fun arose again, he opted to mind his own business—and departed.

4 The Seven Sleepers refers to a story about a group of persecuted young men who hid in a cave rather than acquiesce to the Roman emperor Decius’s demand that they recant their faith and worship idols. The young men fall asleep in the cave for centuries and upon waking attempt to purchase provisions using outdated currency. Iterations of the story appear in both the Bible and the Quran.

5 Stāh mashq technically refers to an exercise in penmanship. Figuratively, it alludes to intense practice in a vocation or art. The use of the term is noteworthy following the reference to stāh qalam in the previous sentence, specifically the repetition of the word stāh (black) in both expressions.

6 This club belonged to Nīrū-yi Sīvum, a political party led by Khalil Maleki that broke away from the communist Tudeh Party of Iran. Al-e Ahmad was one of its members.

7 We have chosen to translate the idiomatic expression āb-hā az āsīyāb uftād literally. Figuratively speaking, the widely used expression refers to a point in time when matters calm down.
under the burden posed by his expenses. How many complaints his father muttered under his breath. What silent scowls—as if to say, “Since when was painting a profession?” And from us, what encouragement. Especially my brother Shams: that his father send for his monthly expenses and that “The West is cold. Not everyone is destined to be a landlord.” Matters came to such a head that Shams briefly became a sort of substitute for him in the family—reassuring the father that his eldest son had gone away seeking, in painting, to draw his rug from the river like a fish, and perhaps to forget his sadness for those who drowned and for waves.

In the years that followed, any time he headed to Tehran, we found ourselves cheek-to-cheek all over again. Until this last time, when I noticed him wielding the glory of art in his thin frame, cane in hand. And now, he fears becoming a “borghese”! If you hung out with him, you would have no choice but to understand a few Italian words. I learned many more than just these few. Sometimes we collaborated. He drew the birds for the special issue on Nima Yushij in Andīshih u Hunar (March–April 1960). Before that he designed the portrait of an old man for my “Nima’s Problem” (“Ilm u Zindigi,” April–May 1952), followed by his humble sketch for Urazan (March 1954), and, most recently, he did the layout for By the Pen (Nūn wa al-Qalam). Now I

8 The Persian reads rāh-i khūrija’i barāyi kharji. The expenses from which he is finding relief (or an escape) concern his own exit (or escape)—that is, his ability to leave the country and pursue his hidden passions.

9 Put simply, this clause says the eldest son went away to support himself by painting. We have chosen to retain the idiomatic expression at the heart of the phrase gīlimash rā bi shīki māhī az dāh-i naqāshi bikishad—that is, gīlimash rā az dāh bikishad—in order to communicate Al-e Ahmad’s poetic and literary ingenuity. Two idiomatic English-language expressions capture the meaning of the phrase: one, “he pulled himself up by his bootstraps” and, two, “she kept her head above water.” Neither captures the sense of Al-e Ahmad’s rendition. The phrase refers to nomadic peoples who produced Kilim rugs as a source of income and livelihood, as in “he pulled his Kilim rug from the water.” On the move, nomads would cross rivers at which point their belongings were weighted by water. To pull or draw one’s Kilim rug from the water thus signals a challenging task upon which one’s livelihood depends. Al-e Ahmad makes the expression his own, describing the water in the phrase as “the water of painting” [dāh-i naqāṣhi] and comparing the act of drawing one’s source of survival (i.e., one’s Kilim rug) from that “water” to a fish [šīki-i māhī]. Fish, of course, draw their survival from the river. From the late 1950s, they are also a commonly occurring image in Mohassess’s paintings. The synonymous relationship between the verbs “pull” and “draw” in English captures some of the music in the original.

10 The expression az bikh rīsh ham bīdīh-īm signals proximity and nearness, wittingly or otherwise.

11 Nima Yushij was Iran’s preeminent modernist poet, with whom Mohassess felt an exceedingly strong bond. Urazan is an ethnography written in the form of a travelogue about a
wonder whether my invitation and his agreement to follow my order was due to our desire, at times, for him to glance through domestic (khudī) windows and look inward. Regardless, what is clear is that he was our guide to some of the foreign terms for painting and architecture in Rome.12

It was the summer of 1957. Simin and I arrived in Rome, one of us holding a ticket paid for by the Institute of Fine Arts, and the remaining expenses taken from our own pockets. There were “imprints and impressions” (naqsh u nigār).13 And that single ticket? I’ll take it (nāz-i shastash)! I would take my wife by the arm, for she was unfamiliar with the malfunctions characteristic of printing machines and presses. The Institute of Fine Arts had tied hopes and aspirations to the pages we were to fill, papering over any flaws (sitār-ul-ayāb). We were searching. We were preoccupied with painting and painters. We saw possibilities for a market, for youth, for passion. If you were not careful, many could fall in a ditch, and some inevitably did. I was yet to sweat out my fever for the West. Simin and Mohassess were there as well. In that center of Christian thought, we became pilgrim students or rather student pilgrims, with the entirety of our existence.

We traipsed hand in hand with Bahman from this street to that alley, visiting the most obscure small village in Iran from which Al-e Ahmad’s ancestors descended. Nūn wa al-Qalam is a work of fiction published in 1961 in which Al-e Ahmad developed political critiques through “folkloric symbolism.” For an English-language discussion of the latter two texts, see Hamid Dabashi, Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 54–56, 58–60.

12 There is a discrepancy between the two Persian-language printings of the text. The 2001 version reads, ū rāhnimāyī ma būd bih dārvāzh-hāyī bigānīh-i naqāshī va mi’mārī dar rum. That is, “he was our guide to the foreign gates of painting and architecture in Rome.” The original 1964 version reads, ū rāhnimāyī ma būd bih ba’zīh az vājīh-hāyī bigānīh-i naqāshī va mi’mārī dar rum. We have chosen to translate the 1964 version, published when Al-e Ahmad was alive, as it accords with the meaning of the surrounding sentences.

13 This is a reference to Simin Daneshvar, a renowned novelist and translator (and Al-e Ahmad’s wife), who in 1966 authored Siavashū. She was also editor-in-chief of Naqsh u Nigār, an arts journal recently inaugurated in Iran at the time. The use of quotation marks in the original suggests a reference to the journal in addition to the general significance of these two words.

14 Bī chashm-i sar u dil is a poetic and spiritual turn of phrase. It literally translates as “to the eyes of our head and heart.” The “eyes of the head” [chashm-i sar] signal external sight or the ability to discern what mystics call zāhir. The “eyes of the heart” [chashm-i dīl] signal internal sight and wisdom—insight and instinct, or what mystics call bātin. The two poles complement one another in this phrase so as to signal an action taken with the whole of one’s existence. In simple terms, they followed their heart or rather did what their heart desired. The phrase recalls a spiritual understanding of individuality, prevalent in Iranian culture as well as in Mohassess’s assessment of his artwork.
paintings (pardih) and sculptures in the most remote churches and squares. From this hallway to that crypt, doling out alms to a man of the cloth and then, in the Seraglio, another coin in the electric switch to implore the light. When the switch opened its path, the rise of a canvas’s (pardih) bright shadow broke against the wall. And when the respite of light came to an end, we read the signature at the foot of that canvas (pardih) in his tongue. Another coin, another Caravaggio. Later, tired of begging for light, we fled to the squares and wet our lips at the foot of the Bernini fountain. Or we would flee to the suburbs, to Villa d’Este with its series of fountains or to Ostia Antica with its mithrae (ma’bud-i mihr-ash).15

Hannaneh16 was in Rome at that same time, so were Vaziri,17 Mansooreh18 and Lady Behjat,19 Sarshar20 and Gharib.21 What evening strolls, what full (sarshār) and strange (ghārib) whispers of the heart. That Trastevere night . . . What blessings—to be in the company of those who were present, some of whom coped with homesickness and learned the language of their setting at a table paid for by the wages they earned dubbing Italian films. I mentioned as much to Hannaneh at the time. Hannaneh, who attended to the group and made certain they received the bare minimum they needed to survive. How the Institute of Fine Arts would later trumpet these same characters, until hearts would bleed from compassion and provide for their sustenance.22

If the souvenir brought by those who return from Italy is what it is, it is in part due to their working without wages (bigārī)—which was a hundred times more honorable than not working at all (bikari).

I do not know if Mohassess attended school or not. I mean, an art school, for painting. I know he has the disposition of someone

16 Morteza Hannaneh (1923–89) was an Iranian composer and horn player.
17 Mohsen Vaziri-Moghadam (1924–2018) was an Iranian painter.
18 Mansooreh Hosseini (1926–2012) was an Iranian painter.
19 Behjat Sadr (1924–2009) was an Iranian painter.
20 Hossein Sarshar (1931–92) was an Iranian opera singer, musician, and voice and film actor.
21 Gholam Hossein Gharib (1922–2004) was an Iranian writer and musician.
22 Many of these personalities served in different roles in state art schools and universities after returning to Iran. For instance, Behjat Sadr became a professor and later the head of the plastic-arts department at the University of Tehran. Gholam Hossein Gharib first became the deputy director and then the head of the Tehran Conservatory of Music, a position he occupied for thirteen years.
who never stepped foot in a classroom—stubborn, pretentious, insufferable, competent, self-made. He completed portraits, woodcuts, watercolors, oil paintings. When we visited Rome, he was at work with *aqua regia* in a shop. More recently, he has developed a tendency for irony. His “Madame Fifi” shall sing a song for you as meaningless as the song any Madame Fifi would sing.\(^{23}\) His humans, deformed by stone and pressure as if having just escaped from a vice grip or “posing” before the camera of your eye to preserve their honor. If in each of his exhibitions you encounter a new set of works, if the harmony of colors on his canvases (*pardih*) plays a song before “the ears of your eyes” (as the old man would say),\(^{24}\) if he has moved the delicacy of technique beyond the grace of Lady Behjat, the reason lies in his incessant search—for a route to escape contemporary painting’s stutter. He has surely heard the quote by Sartre that the “painter” is mute, that he does not draw signs on the canvas (like words) but instead creates a thing.\(^{25}\) Perhaps this is why most of our contemporary painters are grand idols, quiet and made of stone? And why, try and speak with them as you may, they shroud themselves in solemn silence? As if to say: “Our words are on the canvas (*pardih*).” At any rate, under these circumstances, Mohassess’s presence is a blessing. He arrives bearing a cane—perhaps with the intent to repel evil—but he does not manufacture an aura for himself behind a veil (*pardih*) of silence. One can easily sit with him and share a few words about the cold comforts we have discovered.

My point of contention with these “modern” contemporary painters: “The circumstances conditioning our times and the state apparatus will use your mute language and your eye-catching colors, devoid of

---

\(^{23}\) “Fifi” refers to a painting by Mohassess titled *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (*Fifi az khush-hâlî zuzîh mikishad*), which he completed shortly before this essay was written and published in 1964. In Mitra Farahani’s 2013 film, also titled *Fifi Howls from Happiness*, Mohassess describes “Fifi” as one of his earlier paintings, one he was never willing to sell because “Fifi, my dear, is me, is you, is him. I was never willing to sell it . . . because . . . it’s mine.”\(^{24}\)


substance, to render a device that fools the herd. And this is how history will judge you.”

Mohassess has not fallen into the ditch. I say these words to the door for the wall to hear.

When I say there is nothing behind your colorful canvas, your flowery veil (pardih), I mean to say it leaves me cold, lifeless. Your work bears no relation to our memories, our states of mind. A movement, a tremor, a provocation, an ascent—alas something. At the very least, revive a memory. There are doors and there are walls. You slather them with paint. But these walls rest on weak supports. However much you try to adorn arches with ifrit, the foundations are in ruins. There is no need for the slim nib of this pen to make the walls tumble. Another reality also exists: what kind of people, and where, give weight to this brush in the hands of these esteemed gentlemen? Could it be anywhere but the West? This is where our story becomes the story of a seedling moved around, still deprived of roots, merely decorative, in need of a greenhouse, and so on. It is not just the story of those who have visited the West and seen it with their own eyes. It is also the story of those who have never even visited nor seen it. It is their story as well. When the Biennale and its jurors are Western, when the Institute of Fine Arts has become nothing but a branch of foreign publicity and propaganda (tablighāt), when they export sacks upon sacks of “modern” art with affectation and pretense, and scrolls upon scrolls of folk dances, carpet looms, and Qāsim Abādī dresses to cloak their naked legs and widespread ignorance, they pull the wool over your eyes. That wool invariably reaches the eyes of painters who have never stepped foot in the West—the painter who still considers the broken figure of Venus, the tops of the Corinthian columns, the Renaissance, the Gothic, and other such nonsense as models. Yes indeed, mutes across the world share a common tongue.


The English term “ifrit” signals a kind of demon in Islamic mythology, often identified with the spirits of the dead. It appears pluralized in the original as ‘ifrīyāt.

Author note: See Westruckness.

This is a reference to the Tehran Biennale, which was held five times from 1958 to 1966.

Qāsim Abādī is used as a descriptor for clothing worn by women in select parts of the Gilan province. Al-e Ahmad uses the word shalītī, a dress worn in these settings, to describe their clothing. For further context, see “Āshnāb bā lībās-i mahāl-yi zanān-i gilānī, az shalītī tā bastān-i chādūr-i shab,” Hamsahārī, 3 Isfand 1398 [February 22, 2020], https://www.hamsaharionline.ir/news/485913.

Both printings of the essay read qaz ‘ibālat. We believe this is a typographical error. It should read khaz ‘ibālat, which means “nonsense.”
Lest we forget, painting has never expressed prophecy or a message. It has always been decoration or magic. Or a talisman. Take anything from the interior of the pyramids to the caves of “Ajanta,” from the pictures on handwritten manuscripts to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, and from the engravings of the Font-de-Gaume to the decorations of UNESCO buildings in Paris and Siqueiros’s works adorning the doors and walls of Mexico: painting has always been a slave to words, or in the service of the heavens or a decoration on the doors and walls of grand individuals. Or simply of grand doors and walls. It bodes well that in the age of the camera, writing and cinema dishonored painting. Even as decoration, painting bears the burdens of a second wife. This is why she rebelled. Notwithstanding the fact that hers was a domestic uprising, she still somehow managed to disrupt everything. All to say, “I am independent.” And to gain that independence, she embarked on a complex world of conceptual curiosities and arose from it victorious. For years since, writers sat and composed the exegetical commentaries and interpretations it took for us to finally recognize her merits. This is all understandable, indisputable, very fine and good. But gentlemen, notice how you still depend on the word for your daily bread. Take care to leave behind some crumbs so writers can find you in that conceptual world of yours. Otherwise, what is the difference between a phenom and a mad person? I can hear your retort: “You do not possess any training in painting, which explains why you fail to see our clues.” I would say, “correct” and “you are absolutely right.” For if I had trained in painting, my signature would be the one to appear at the bottom of your canvases (pardih-hā). But do you merely draw on a canvas (pardih mīkīshī) for those with whom you share your pannier (ham pālīkī-hayi khudat)? The contemporary “modern” painter relies on these pens for their exegetical commentary, for their work to be legible in the West, let alone here. However, they do not read the works produced by these writers. If and when they do, they refuse to see the world from their perspective.

32 The phrase pardih mīkīshī is most commonly used to indicate the drawing of curtains, as if to shroud or veil a thing in obscurity. Al-e Ahmad could have used the phrase naqāshī kardan [to paint] instead. We have chosen a literal translation for ham pālīkī-hā (“those with whom you share a pannier”) instead of the simpler “peers” in order to retain the poetry of Al-e Ahmad’s writing. The Dehkhoda dictionary defines pālīk as a kajawah—that is, a pannier used on camels and mules. The term “pannier” derives from the older French term panier, meaning bread basket. Is it a coincidence that just before this statement, Al-e Ahmad describes contemporary painters as still reliant on the word for their daily bread (hanūz nānkhu-rī kalāmīd)?
Ultimately, the razzle-dazzle of the West occludes their vision. In the name of worldliness, the painter is of a mind to shed their skin and emerge among the ranks of the holier-than-thou. Unaware that if you have something worth seeing in your own tight-knit community, that if “insiders” (khudī) accept you, then the world will too. Do not assume that I am calling for isolation. You know very well, I am not the type. As I have said elsewhere, I do not recognize any borders other than the umbilical cord that is my mother tongue and from which I hang. But you—do not dare assume that you have fastened a secure position for yourself with the spiderwebs that constitute a “Western technique.” Even at the Biennale, they seat you in a pavilion reserved to exhibit “foreigners.” What souvenir will you give them with your foreignness? Are you expected to remain a consumer of the West? I am not asking you to place your brush, in homage, at the feet of local colors and tradition. Nor is it possible to remain in perpetuity under the spell cast by coloring Kalamkari, name stampers, and paisley designs like an unimaginative novice. I am telling you to grasp my hand and from the top of a ladder draw your veil, your canvas (pardih-at barkish).

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. 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, for I know. This desire to end up amidst the ranks of the holier-than-thou is merely an expression of the shame you feel when the market projects your inadequacy. Come and sharpen your sword against the rough edges of this projection. Know that if a gem is a gem, it will find its buyer. But alas, what a pity that you merely seek a buyer for your wares. I have sat at the foot of your pulpit and have observed your wailing odes and listened to your laments, “People don’t buy, they don’t understand, there is no critique. . . .” These are the cries of a baby whose milk arrived late. Someone with something to say or something of substance to show would not beg for support. They would not frighten their audience away by indulging in “snobbism.” They

33 Author note: Andīshih u Hunar, Mihr 1343 [September/October 1964], 399.
34 Here, Al-e Ahmad means the Venice Biennale. Pahlavi Iran participated in this event from 1956 to 1966.
35 We have chosen to retain the ambiguity of the phrase pardih-at barkish by including its multiple significations in English—that is, drawing a veil or curtain [pardīh] to expose what lies behind it and drawing on a canvas [pardih].
would never allow their audience to look like a fool by imitating the West. These are my last words: If you have roots in this soil, do not blossom in autumn. It is an ill omen. And if you have become the ornament that decorates our assembly and not one of us, draw a line around my words. Close them off. Set them aside.36

TRANSLATED BY ARASH DAVARI AND MOHAMMADREZA MIRZAEI*

---

36 We have added the sentences “Close them off” and “Set them aside” to convey the scope of the idiomatic expression in dur in qalam râ khat bikish [draw a line around this pen]. The expression (“drawing a line around”) indicates an act of separation and exclusion such that the contents of the resulting circle are forgotten and discarded.

* Mohammadreza Mirzaei thanks Stuart Denison for his valuable assistance during the translation process. Arash Davari thanks Melika Abikenari, Pouya Afshar, Nasser Mohajer, Sina Rahmani, and Arash Saedinia for their help while translating this text.