

## **Ancient To Modern: Hearing the artistic voices of Iran**

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### **Overview**

“All art bears witness to human existence through the prism of beauty”  
[Wajdi Mouawad, explaining the central notion of his work].

We as Americans, high school students and adults alike, hear so much in the news about the Middle East. But the area itself has been demonized and then ignored. Most would not be able to locate the country of Iran on a map, and yet we hear and speak of being at the brink of war with a nation we barely understand. The implications of this are tremendous. We see women veiled, but why? What is the story behind this? We hear about oil and weapons of mass destruction, but is that it? High school students should be given the opportunity to learn as much as they can about a nation we often see and hear about in the news, so that as they progress into adulthood, they can make informed and not ignorant decisions. This unit will seek to use art as a means to explore and compare the viewpoint and perspective of Iranian artists, what their art has to say to us as Americans, but also to the human condition.

### **Rationale**

The arts are a great unifier across subject areas and are a window into peoples and cultures. Thus, the art classroom might be the most engaging way to get students to understand and be interested in not just the lives and perspective of a few Iranian artists, but to see how their stories and culture compare to our own when it comes to such themes as coming-of-age, freedom, fear, rebellion, and war. Watching the animated adaptation of *Persepolis*, I was struck by the behind the scenes footage, where Marjane Satrapi discusses the reasons for why she chose an all black and white graphic novel as her medium of choice. Her story was made more relevant, more approachable by choosing black and white cartoons. Those who did not grow up in the Middle East have their own

pre-conceived notions of what it is like there, so this gives us a more universal human story—that this could happen anywhere, not just Iran. To counter the anti-Islamic revolution sentiment, students will have the opportunity to view the other side by viewing Iranian art made during the revolution that was in favor of it. The students will perhaps, note valid reasons for that rebellion.

I find it is also important to help students understand and give credit for the many artistic contributions of Iran throughout history.

### *Historical Background*

Relations between the U.S. and Iran were severed in November 1979, when 52 Americans were taken hostage from the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. For the next 35 years, tensions grew, sometimes to the breaking point. In order to understand how these events took place, one must understand how modern Iran came to be.

It should be duly noted that Iranians are not Arab. This is a common misconception in the West. Iranians speak Persian or Farsi. Arabic is considered the language of literature. Events in Persia (later renamed Iran in 1935) are heavily influenced by its dealings with Europe and European involvement in Iranian affairs. “By the latter part of the nineteenth century some thinkers in Iran, and in the Middle East more generally, had gone from an initial response to the West of bafflement, reactionary resentment, or uncritical admiration to adaptation, resistance, or reform” (Axworthy 197).

Many date the beginning of modern Iranian history to the nationalist uprisings against the Shah (Persian word for “king”) in 1905 and the establishment of a limited constitutional monarchy in 1906. Mohammed al-Din Shah ruled from 1907 through 1909 as part of the Qajar dynasty. In that time he sold concessions to Europe for tobacco so they could keep the wealth to themselves. This is what sparked the constitutional movement. The key discovery of oil in 1908 would become a huge factor in Iranian history as well, but at the time, tobacco was thought to be of more importance than oil. The Bazaar merchants, the Ulama (religious elite), and the reformers in society united against giving away Iran’s resources. However, each group had different goals in mind.

In 1921, Reza Khan, an Iranian officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade, seized control of the government. In 1925, after ousting the Qajar dynasty, he declared himself shah (king) and established the Pahlavi dynasty.

### *The Reestablishment of Royal Autocracy in Iran*

Reza Shah forcibly enacted policies of modernization and secularization in Iran and reasserted government authority over the country’s tribes and provinces. Iranian nationalism was redefined during this time. There was an efficient taxation system, railroads built, and mandatory military service. During World War II, the Allies feared that the Shah’s close relations with Nazi Germany would jeopardize Iran as a source of oil and a vital supply link to the Soviet Union. In 1935, the Anglo-Persian oil company

was established. In 1939, the British claim Iran is pro-Hitler. In September, 1941, following the occupation of western Iran by the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom, Reza Shah was forced to abdicate his power. His son, Muhammed Reza Pahlavi, ascended the throne. Muhammed Reza (1919-1980) was raised to succeed his father but grew up in a life of privilege removed from the Iranian people. (Cleveland 288) His military and political education were closely supervised by his father. But by the time Muhammed Reza took the throne, Iran was being occupied by Anglo-Soviet interests that threatened the authority of the government. Iran at this time was a political and ideological battleground for the Cold War. Foreign domination threatened the stability of Iran as each tried to pull strings to serve their interests. The British supported the idea of a constitutional monarchy which had served their interests well in Arab nations. This monarchy would in turn help form bonds of cooperation between the government and the elite landowners who wanted to maintain the status quo. The Soviets supported the activities of the Tudeh (Marxist) party and hoped that they would take over the government. And the United States, who was new to the contest for dominance in Iran tended to back any faction that was against the Soviets and their perceived Communist-spreading ambitions. Thus, U.S. advisors developed close ties with the Iranian armed forces. For his part, Muhammed Reza was up against a mounting widespread movement of popular protest. Iranians across the political and religious spectrum were uniting against the issue of foreign domination and interference in political but especially in the areas of economic resources and trade concessions.

### *Mossadegh and the National Front*

Muhammed Mossadegh was popular precisely because of the increasing discontent surrounding foreign domination. Although never a colony or a protectorate, Iran still ceased to achieve sovereignty in their affairs. As William Cleveland states, "Iran's economic development was placed largely in the hands of European entrepreneurs; from the Russo British invasion in 1914 to the Soviet-British occupation of 1941, Iran's independence was violated whenever it suited European Great Powers to do so" (290). Discontent was also placed on the monarchs who had allowed and continued to allow the foreign domination and concessions to continue. The nationalist sentiment found a spokesperson in Muhammed Mossadegh. Mossadegh had a career in politics as a cabinet minister, provincial governor, and Majlis deputy. He earned a reputation of honesty and integrity (Cleveland 290). In 1949 several political parties and interest groups joined together under Mossadegh's leadership to form the National Front. In 1951, the government of nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh (elected the same year) nationalized the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). In the face of strong public support for Mossadegh, the Shah fled to Rome. Once the oil industry was nationalized, the AIOC called for a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil. The U.S. joined the boycott in 1952 and Iran was essentially prevented from selling oil on the international market. This caused extreme economic hardships, but Mossadegh would not give in on the nationalization issue. In October of 1952 his government severed diplomatic relations with Britain. Although Mossadegh was not a communist, the U.S. and U.K. feared that he had links to the pro-Soviet, Marxist Tudeh (Masses) party. Consequently, in August 1953, the U.S. and the U.K.(using the CIA) engineered a coup against the democratically

elected Mossadegh, during which pro-Shah army forces arrested the prime minister. The Shah returned to Iran thereafter and, fearing further opposition began to govern Iran in an increasingly authoritarian manner. Political freedom did not exist. In an attempt to appear democratic, there was a two-party system. But it was so restricted it was known as the “yes” and “yes sir” parties (Cleveland 293). Election results were manipulated and any opposition to the shah was crushed.

In 1961, Iran administered a series of economic, social, and administrative reforms—pushed by the Kennedy administration—that became known as the White Revolution. As a result of this program, which was driven by reform, modernization and economic growth proceeded at an unprecedented rate. This tremendous growth was fueled by Iran’s vast petroleum reserves, which were then the third largest in the world. However, while Iran’s economy prospered, democratic reform and civil liberties deteriorated. The Shah’s autocratic method of rule and the abusive practices of SAVAK (the internal security and intelligence service) alienated large sectors of the population, including the Shi’a clergy. SAVAK had arrested and tortured political prisoners. In January of 1978 soldiers had gunned down students peacefully protesting.

### *The Iranian Revolution and Islam*

### *Common themes in the art of Persia/Iran*

For the purposes of this curriculum, I focus more heavily on a particular country in the Middle East, one that has been much maligned by U.S. news media. In the particular, we find the universal. I chose two female Iranian artists because the interesting fact is there is a phenomenon, that nearly every single well known Iranian outside Iran, today, is a woman. Shirin Neshat, probably the most critically acclaimed Iranian artist outside of Iran has said:

Perhaps those who are more oppressed tend to be more creative about speaking out. And evidently, it’s far *harder* for a woman to find a voice in Iran; as writers, artists, or filmmakers, they have to endure far more, in every aspect of life, and therefore their point of view is often more poignant (Zanganeh 47)

To get a more well-rounded picture of what was happening in Iran at the time of the Revolution, we will take a look at its political art. Certainly, after understanding the roots of the situation there is room for sympathy with the Islamic Revolution’s cause.

## Objectives

This unit is intended for high school students in an Art I class. Its duration can span a two week time period.

The objectives will include the following:

- To establish a timeline for contemporary events in Iran starting with the Islamic revolution
- To compare, critique, and analyze the mediums and message of artists Shirin Neshat and Marjane Satrapi.
- To examine traditional forms of Iranian or otherwise Islamic art
- To research and find examples of Persian/Iranian contributions to architecture, sculpture, ceramics, manuscripts, and textiles.
- Seeing and interpreting firsthand examples of middle eastern art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art
- To create a collaborative presentation about the cultural and artistic contributions of Iran past and present.

## Strategies

Students will work individually and collaboratively in this unit. First they must establish their assumptions and preconceived notions of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Then as a facilitator, I will help guide students to understand the geographical location and the major historical events that created the Iran we know today. We will delve into the story of Marjane Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* to get a firsthand account of living in Iran during the revolution. From Satrapi, we will compare her imagery and message with that of Shirin Neshat. Students will be comparing, critiquing, and analyzing the two artists. Lastly, students will have a chance, in groups to research the artistic legacy and contributions of Iran to our modern western culture in the form of textiles, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, and manuscripts. Groups will present their findings to the class using audio and/or visuals.

*Pennsylvania Visual Arts Content Standards addressed:*

### **9.1 Production, Performance, and Exhibition of Visual Arts**

B. Demonstration of the Visual Arts

D. Styles in production, performance, and exhibition

F. Historical and cultural production, performance, and exhibition

### **9.2 Historical and Cultural Contexts**

A. Contexts of works in the arts

C. Styles and genre in the arts

D. Historical and cultural perspectives

E. Historical and cultural impact

G. Geographic regions in the arts

### **9.3 Critical Response**

- A. Critical processes
- E. Types of analysis
- F. Comparisons

### **9.4 Aesthetic Response**

- C. Environmental influences
- D. Artistic Choices

## **Classroom Activities**

### Lesson 1- An Introduction to Iran and the Islamic Revolution

Objectives:

Students will be able to locate Iran on a map as well as define important events of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Procedure

- Students will work in groups to create a KWL (know, want to know, learned) chart. They will describe what they know about Iran and write down the concepts they would like to learn more about.
- They will be given a map of the Middle East so they can see Iran and its relation to other countries. I will help them create a simplified timeline of major historical events
- Students will read chapter one of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* so that we can begin a discussion of the Islamic Revolution and perhaps Islam itself.
- Students will add any relevant information to their KWL charts.

### Lesson 2- Marjane Satrapi and The Complete Persepolis

Objectives:

Students will compare the use of a graphic novel as a vehicle for storytelling versus printed word alone. After watching the film version of *Persepolis* and some behind the scenes moments where Satrapi discusses her work, students will write and illustrate their own comic strip of a day in their life.

Procedures:

- Students will write a response to the question on the board: Why do you think Marjane Satrapi chose to do black and white comic book illustrations to share her story instead of just printed word?
- Students will be shown the behind-the-scenes clip of Satrapi speaking about her work.

- Students will view the film version and write a response and illustration. (This may take 2 class periods)

### Lesson 3- Satrapi and Neshat: Two artistic voices

#### Objectives:

Looking at a copy of *The Complete Persepolis* and Neshat's *Women of Allah* photographic series, students will do a venn diagram to compare and contrast the message and style of the two artists.

#### Procedures:

- Students will write a response to the question on the board: Is a photograph or an illustration a better representation of someone's reality? Explain your answer
- After discussing answers to the question, students will be introduced to the work of Shirin Neshat (particularly her photographic series)
- Choosing one of the works in the series, students will fill out an art criticism worksheet analyzing what they see and what they think it means.
- Students will then do a venn diagram comparing Neshat's work to Satrapi's.
- Before students leave, they must respond to the question, What is the difference between photography that is considered art and photography that is in newspapers and magazines?

### Lesson 4- The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran

#### Objectives:

Students will view the political art of Iranians during the Iranian revolution of 1979. They will choose a work to answer art criticism questions of the style, message, composition and other formal qualities of the work before giving a visceral response.

#### Procedures:

- Students will work in pairs. From the images provided (see appendix) students will choose work that interests or intrigues them either in style or message.
- Students will fill out an art criticism form (see appendix) in pairs.
- Individually, students will write their overall visceral response to the work and determine what the goal of the artwork was. Students will then determine if the goal was achieved.
- After seeing work by Iranian artists (Neshat and Satrapi) who are critical of the revolution, have students identify ways to relate to those who were pro-revolution.

## Lesson 5- Iranian Cultural/Artistic Contributions

### Objectives:

Students in groups will investigate and research via internet (particularly *artstor*), specific Persian/Iranian cultural contributions (ancient or modern) in the artistic areas of architecture, textiles, paintings, ceramics, and sculpture.

### Procedures:

- Students will be seated in groups. Each group will get a designated art (ie., architecture, textiles, paintings, ceramics, and sculpture)
- Each student within each group will have to find a different Persian/Iranian example of that groups' art form.
- After finding an image (via computer) students must answer the following:
  - a) Who made it? Who was it made for?
  - b) What is it? What function does it serve?
  - c) Where was it made?
  - d) When was it made?
  - e) Where does it reside now?
  - f) Why is it important enough to belong in a museum, if it does?
  - g) How does it help us understand more about the culture in which it was made?
  
- Students in each group must combine all their images and findings into one poster which they will then take turns presenting to the class.

## Lesson 5- Persian Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art

### Objectives:

Students will view actual Persian art in the Philadelphia Art Museum. They will choose one of the works to sketch. Students will be asked to make connections and correlations between all Islamic art in general and just Persian art.

### Procedures:

- Students will take a field trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. General Admission is free for School District of Philadelphia Students.
- Students will be led to the near East Asian section of the art museum so they can view firsthand examples of Persian architectural pieces, tiles, rugs, ceramics, and manuscripts.
- Students are allowed to choose whichever work is most striking to them and sketch it in their sketchbook.
- Students must write what impressed them about the work and what they like about it.
- Students will then be asked to choose descriptive words to describe Persian art and Islamic art in general.



## **Annotated Bibliography/Resources**

Axworthy, Michael. *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

A readable account fitting three millennia of Iranian history, politics, and culture into just under 300 pages.

Blair, Sheila S. and Jonathan M. Bloom. *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Great illustrations used to give students a glimpse into the unique and glorious roots of Islamic art.

Brenner, Carla McKinney, 1951-: *Islamic art and culture: [kit] a resource for teachers/* Written by Carla McKinney Brenner, prepared by the division of Education; National Gallery of Art.

This kit which can be loaned by teachers from the National Gallery through the Wachovia Education Center at the Philadelphia museum of art features Islamic art and cultures resources. A teacher's guide containing maps, historical survey, teaching activities and slide discussions is included. Slides and images on cd are also available.

Cleveland, James and Martin Bunton. *A History of the Modern Middle East, 4th Edition*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2009.

A great overview of middle eastern history particularly, religious, social, and political issues that have contributed to conflict in the area.

Chelkowski, Peter J. and Hamid Dabashi. *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

This book has incredible illustrations and art that was created during the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This is helpful for understanding the mindset of those who wanted a revolution and as a good comparison with Western art and exiled Iranian artists.

Ettinghausen, Richard, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina. *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Although this book does not discuss modern Islamic art, it is important to understand the historical and contextual precedents.

Irwin, Robert. *Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture and the Literary World*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997.

An overall guide for looking at Islamic art in context and comparing and contrasting common themes.

Satrapa, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis*. New York: Random House Inc., 2003

A coming-of-age graphic novel that details Satrapa's life growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution.

Zanganeh, Lila Azam, ed. *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*. Boston: Beacon, 2006.

An intimate panorama of Iran through variegated stories and essays by some of Iran's most gifted writers and artists.

Websites:

<<http://libwww.freelibrary.org/onebook/obop10/index.cfm>>

Resources from the One Book, One Philadelphia program for The Complete Persepolis

<[www.philamuseum.org](http://www.philamuseum.org)>

The Philadelphia museum of art website. There are resources on Islamic art available.

<[www.artstor.com](http://www.artstor.com)>

An image database that works great for showing images to students and creating presentations much like PowerPoint.

<<http://www.time.com/time/europe/photoessays/neshat/>>

A photo essay detailing the life and work of Shirin Neshat

<<http://www.iranian.com/Arts/Dec97/Neshat/>>

A website detailing everything-Iranian

<<http://www.iranian.com/Arts/2001/September/Revolution/index.html>>

An article dealing with Iranian art during the Revolution of 1979. Includes images of art.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/arts/design/16kino.html>>

A New York Times article detailing Iranian artists who shine in the New York art world.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/06/arts/06iht-rcartiran.1.18433844.html>>

A New York Times article detailing artists of the Iranian "diaspora" following the 1979 revolution and their window into a different world.

<<http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam>>

Teacher materials associated with the PBS series *Islam: Empire of Faith*.

## Appendix

### Standards:

The Core Curriculum of the School District of Philadelphia is aligned to the Pennsylvania academic standards for a discipline based art education.

These include:

### 9.1 Production, Performance, and Exhibition of Visual Arts

- B. Demonstration of the Visual Arts
- D. Styles in production, performance, and exhibition
- F. Historical and cultural production, performance, and exhibition

## **9.2 Historical and Cultural Contexts**

- A. Contexts of works in the arts
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From "Staging a Revolution", by P. Chelkowski, H. Dabaishi

Khomeini plays the role of the agent of God, like Moses, and is about to lead the nation out of the Shah's/pharaoh's slavery. Even the traditional dragon which often appears in Persian miniatures is spewing flames on the Shah.





From "Staging a Revolution", by P. Chelkowski, H. Dabashi

A pieta-like figure of a woman holding the head and shoulders of a dying male demonstrator takes up the center of the foreground of the painting. The woman observes a strict Islamic dress code. Everything but her face is covered: her expression is one of sorrow and steely determination.



(<http://fits.depauw.edu/aharris/Courses/Stolen/FinalProjects/BPOLIN/A%20Comparison%202.jpg>)

This is Michelangelo's *Pieta* located in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It depicts the Virgin Mary holding a limp and deceased Jesus just taken off the cross.





From "Staging a Revolution", by P. Chelkowski, H. Dabashi

One of the first revolutionary posters aside from the Ayatollah's portraits was produced soon after the Black Friday Massacre in Zhaleh Square on September 8, 1978. In its simplicity and directness, in its color and imagery, this is one of the greatest examples of political art in the 20th century. Against a black background are laid out the bodies of eight demonstrators wrapped in their white shrouds... The designer [Esmail Shishehgaran] was so courageous that he put his name on the bottom of the poster in both English and Persian, although it was only October 1978 and the outcome of the Revolution was still in the balance.