

222 *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from New York University's Abby Weed Grey Collection.* Grey Art Gallery, New York University, September 10–December 7, 2019.
Curator: Lynn Gumpert

Modernisms is the first exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery at New York University (NYU) to feature Iranian, Turkish, and Indian modern art of the 1960s and early 1970s from the university's Abby Weed Grey Collection. It features twenty-five to thirty pieces from each country, ranging from painting to sculpture. After its display at NYU in fall 2019, it travelled to the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University in Chicago in early 2020, and will be on display at NYU Abu Dhabi's Art Gallery in Fall 2020. A question might come to one's mind when reading the exhibition's title: why display art of these three countries side by side? Gallery Director Lynn Gumpert frankly states that she was working within the limits of the Grey collection and that the exhibition does not attempt to be a survey of the modern art of these three countries.¹ Rather, examination of the works in the context of Grey's collecting tells us as much about modernism in these three

countries as the politics of art collecting by Americans during the Cold War.

Abby Weed Grey described herself as a “dyed-in-the-wool Midwesterner,” and as a young woman she visited Europe with an allowance from her family, which sparked an interest in travel and art.² She married an army officer and led a fairly ordinary life, accompanying him to various posts across the US. He died in 1956, to her surprise, leaving her with an inheritance from railroad stocks he had quietly invested in. This enabled Grey to travel around the world, particularly across the Asian continent, where she was attracted to contemporary art. She did not look for traditional art but wanted to know what people were doing now: she asked how artists were “breaking with the past to cope with the present”—certainly the experience of artists worldwide during the turbulent 1960s.³ Although Grey's interest in art and promoting intercultural communication was genuine, her life and worldview were shaped by American ideas of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, which held that Turkey, Iran, and India were bulwarks against Soviet communism.⁴ Her access to Iran was facilitated by US power and presence that was largely driven by oil. And like other Americans in the 1960s, Grey was attracted to the “East” as a source of spirituality.⁵ By the 70s, Grey found a home for her substantial art collection

at NYU, where she established the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center. In examining her collection and this exhibition, it is essential to recognize that private collections of individuals who had the means to travel and collect, such as the elite “tastemakers” whose collections formed the bases of major museums in the US a century prior, inform conceptions of what is “modern art” to the exclusion of what the collector could not access or did not purchase.

Grey encountered artists in these three countries that were undergoing monumental changes: India had achieved independence from the British Empire and undergone partition in 1947, and Iran and Turkey were in the aftermath of coups in 1953 and 1960, respectively. Each country's leaders and political factions continued to define a modern national identity and a diplomatic position vis-à-vis the Eastern and Western blocs. This exhibition features artists who founded art groups that mediated new styles with local and traditional themes, motifs, techniques, and mediums within this context.

The featured artists tended to train partly abroad, usually in the UK, France, or US, and partly in their countries' top art institutions, such as the Academy of Fine Arts (now Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) in Istanbul, Gazi Educational Institute in Ankara, the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Tehran, and the National Academy of Fine Art in New Delhi. Most of the artists presented were associated with Group D and its offshoots in Turkey, the Saqqakhaneh movement in Iran, and the Progressive Artists Group and Baroda Group in India.⁶ While there are differences between these groups in terms of embracing or rejecting nationalism, internationalism, realism, and abstraction, they share a common desire to break from the artistic establishment. Several themes run throughout the art in *Modernisms*: the manipulation of traditional art forms, such as the illegible lines of Abidin Elderoğlu's *Six Lines of Abstracted Calligraphy* (1960) and Parviz Tanavoli's bronze sculpture *Heech* (1972) (fig. 1), which make us reconsider the possibilities of the written word visually; village life as a subject,



Figure 1: Installation image of *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU's Abby Grey Collection* at Grey Art Gallery, NYU, featuring Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech (Nothing)*, 1972, Grey Art Gallery, NYU Art Collection.
Photograph: Nicholas Papananias.



Figure 2: Eren Eyüboğlu, *Two Sisters*, n.d. Oil and lithograph on paper, 56.5 x 44.5 cm. Grey Art Gallery, NYU Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.24.

as in Mustafa Ashier's *Anatolia* (1960) and Eren Eyüboğlu's *Two Sisters* (n.d.) (fig. 2); reconsidering the "traditional" through a new lens, whether it be Prabhakar Barwe's references to Tantra in *Yantra III* (1964) (fig. 3) or Mumtaz Sultan Ali's depiction of the deity Shiva in *Her Dream* (1969); and the broad scope of the artists' abilities, which push the boundaries of what can be considered "art," such as Siah Armajani's shift from repetitive writing in *Calligraphy* (1964) to repetition through computer typing in *Print Apple 2* (1967). Additionally, some artists responded to specific historical and contemporary events, such as Özer Kabaş (fig. 4), who painted two of the most haunting works featured. In *Exile* (1968), a man, presumably the last Ottoman sultan, Mehmed VI, wears a fez and sits hunched in de-

feat or contemplation, alienated from the blank space around him. Kabaş's other painting depicts an artist with a skull head who paints abstract blotches on his canvas and looks back over his shoulder, saying, *MERHABA MRS. GREY...WE ARE JUST 'FINE'* (1969): its absurdity could allude to the post-coup period.

One strength of this exhibition is the inclusion of artists and works that help us re-evaluate the existing canon of mid-twentieth-century modernism in Turkey, Iran, and India. For example, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian is known best for combining traditional Iranian techniques of glass cutting, Islamic geometric patterns, and modern abstract art into dazzling mirrored sculptures;

however, she had not yet begun such experimentation when Grey was collecting. Seeing her earlier work, such as *Flowers* (1965), in which she painted flowers on linoleum and pressed them onto canvas or glass to create monotypes, allows us to trace Farmanfarmaian's career from her earliest work with unusual mediums. Painter Mohan Samant until recently had been excluded from the narrative of postcolonial art, since he spent much of his life in NYC and shunned artist circles. His compatriot, Satish Gurjal, rejected the well-tread path of studying abroad in Europe or the US for Mexico City, where he developed his skills in mural painting. This focus on artists' time spent abroad, as well as in their home countries, is a step in the direction of framing modernism as a network of global exchange—although not on equal terms—rather than attempting to separate it into sub-movements by country. The accompanying exhibition catalogue stresses that even though these artists can be grouped under the category of "modernism," they worked in groups with different attitudes about what contemporary art—or even art itself—should be, and these ideas changed significantly over the course of the decade in which Grey collected, hence the appropriateness of the plural title *Modernisms*.

Aside from the contributions of the exhibition to our understanding of modernism, there are a few areas that merit criticism. The Iranian and Indian sections of the gallery were allowed sufficient space, yet the Turkish works began on the ground floor and continued to the rather cramped basement level. This may be due to the familiarity with Iranian modern art in New York compared to that with Turkish, or lack of sculpture in the Turkish section compared to that in the other two. This points more to the need for opportunities and space to show Turkish art, overlooked in modern exhibitions in the US, than lack of attention or care by the gallery. Grey's collection features more art from Iran than any other country, thus presenting an additional challenge to the curators in creating this exhibition. Indeed, an exhibition focused solely on modernism in just one of these countries alone

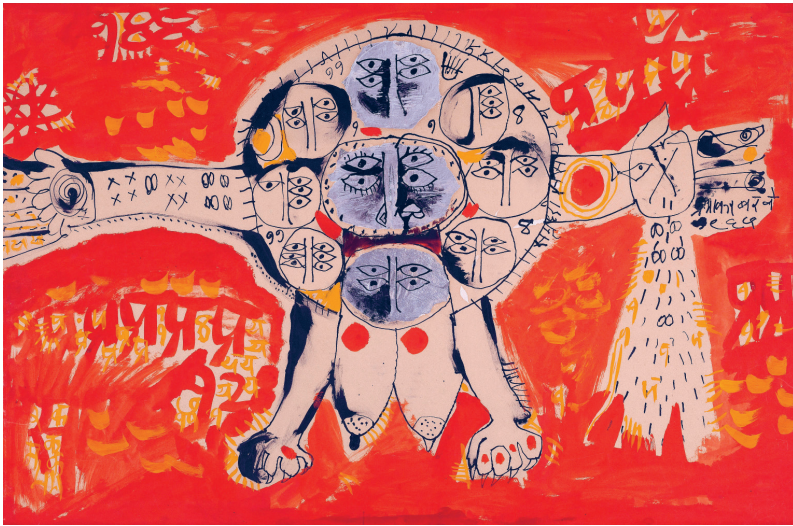


Figure 3: Prabhakar Barwe, *Yantra III*, 1964. Watercolor, ink, and silver paper on paper, 49.2 x 74 cm. Grey Art Gallery, NYU Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.152.

would have been a remarkable show. The exhibition wall text might have delved further into the fact that Grey accessed many institutions and artists in these three countries through the local branches of the United States Information Agency (1953–1999), which was dedicated to diplomacy and known as a source of US propaganda abroad. The exhibition catalogue does devote sufficient space to this topic with Sarah-Neel Smith's essay. Grey seems to have had a sincere desire to promote intercultural understanding through art, but at the same time, her worldview was shaped by the context of postwar American anticommunism and paternalistic philanthropy. *Modernisms* demonstrates the difficult yet necessary labor of institutions evaluating their founders' life work, especially today when American art institutions are coming to terms with the power imbalances that shaped their creation and still operate within their walls.

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1 Lynn Gumpert, "Foreword," in *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from New York University's Abby Weed Grey Collection*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 2019), 7.

2 Gumpert, "Direct Dialogues: Reflections on Abby Weed Grey," in Gumpert, *Modernisms*, 9.

3 Ibid., 11. See note 10: Abby Weed Grey, *The Picture is the Window: The Window is the Picture* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 15–16.

4 For more on US in Turkey and the Middle East during the Cold War regarding modernism, see Begüm Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2018); Sibel Bozdoğan, "Democracy, Development, and Americanization of Turkish Architectural Culture in the 1950s," in *Modernism and the Middle East*, ed. Sandy Isenstadt and Kishwar Rizvi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 117–139; Ela Kaçel, "Information or Culture: The Intellectual Dissemination of Americanism As Common Sense," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 50 (2014): 171–188; Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Sarah-Neel Smith, "Forgotten Geographies of Artistic Diplomacy: Abby Weed Grey and U.S.-Middle East Exchanges in the 1960s" in Gumpert, *Modernisms*, 123–134.

5 "Modernisms: Vishakha N. Desai, Vasif Kortun, and Hamed Yousefi in Conversation with Lynn Gumpert" in Gumpert, *Modernisms*, 28–29; and Ali Mirsepassi and Hamed Yousefi, "Abby Weed Grey's Journey to the East: Iranian Modernity During the Cold War" in Gumpert, *Modernisms*, 66–71.



Figure 4: Özer Kabaş, *Exile*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 120 x 90.2 cm. Grey Art Gallery, NYU Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.301.

6 For more information on art institutions and movements in Turkey during this period, see Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Turkey, Germany, and the Modern House* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); S. M. Can Bilsel, "Our Anatolia: Organicism and the Making of Humanist Culture in Turkey," *Muqarnas* 24 (2007): 223–241; Sibel Bozdoğan and Esra Akcan, *Turkey: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013); Nilüfer Öndin, *Cumhuriyet'in Kültür Politikası ve Sanat 1923–1950* (Istanbul: İnsancıl Yayınları, 2003); Kenan Behzat Sharpe, "A Mediterranean Sixties: Cultural Politics in Turkey, Greece, and Beyond," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building*, ed. Chen Jian et al. (London: Routledge, 2018), 169–189.

For Iran, see Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Fereshteh Daftari, *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019); Daftari, "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective" in Gumpert, *Modernisms*, 43–63; Karim Emami, "Post-Qajar (Painting)" in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, v. 2, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 640–646; and Javad Mojabi, *Pioneers of Contemporary Persian Painting: First Generation* (Tehran: Iranian Art Publishing, 1998). For India, see Iftekhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Zehra Jumabhoy and Boon Hui Tan, *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India* (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2018); Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Devika Singh, "A Modern Formation? Circulating International Art in India 1950s–1970s," in *Western Artists and India: Creative Inspirations in Art and Design*, ed. Shanay Jhaveri (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 46–57.