

The Wall Street Journal

CULTURAL CONVERSATION

A Society Evolves

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

Sept. 3, 2013 4:25 p.m. ET

New York

Chances are, if you played a game of word association with "Iran," you'd get back responses like hostage, theocracy, ayatollah, Persia, terrorism and nuclear proliferation.



Christopher Serra

Come Sept. 6, in the galleries of the Asia Society in New York, a different image of the country will be unveiled in "Iran Modern," the first major international loan exhibition of art made there from the 1950s through the 1970s. Perhaps surprisingly, Iran's then ruler, the repressive, autocratic Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavī, granted artists relative freedom; built museums, including the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art; and allowed participation in international art festivals like the Venice Biennale. "There was a real flowering of the art scene," said Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum. "There was a lot of

experimentation with styles and forms. They think of this as a time of great pluralism."

The exhibition, which Ms. Chiu said presents an Iran whose art was both locally attuned and globally connected to a greater degree than has been acknowledged, was designed to change perceptions. It thus embodies Ms. Chiu's evolving exhibition program at the Asia Society. When in 1956 John D. Rockefeller 3rd founded the Asia Society to educate Americans about the increasingly influential continent across the Pacific, he included culture in its mission. At first, that meant traditional art. In the 1990s, contemporary Asian and Asian-American art were added to the mix. The museum regularly organized exhibitions displaying what Ms. Chiu calls "the best of Asian culture."

But by the time Ms. Chiu, an Australian who founded the Asia-Australia Arts Centre in Sydney, arrived to be curator of contemporary art 12 years ago (she was promoted to director in 2004), U.S. museums had caught up. They were exhibiting an increasing amount of Asian art. So no longer does the Asia Society Museum present "Asia 101," Ms. Chiu said. Rather, she strives to reveal aspects of Asian art to Americans for the first time or to see ahead to ideas that will be topical when an exhibition, which may take years to organize, comes to fruition. "We look at interstices, at moments in history—transitional moments or those that are underrecognized," she explained. "I think there's a great thirst for topicality that teaches us different stories."

In 1998, for example, the Asia Society staged the first major U.S. exhibition of contemporary Chinese art, "Inside Out: New Chinese Art." Before long, contemporary Chinese art was turning up everywhere, and Ms. Chiu took a different tack after learning, in discussions with artists in China, that Social Realist art "was a major influence on contemporary art of today. They told me you have to go back to the Cultural Revolution" to

understand what they were doing now.

That led to her 2008 show, "Art and China's Revolution," the first to explore art produced in the 30 years after Mao Zedong's 1949 revolution. Co-curated by Zheng Shengtian, an artist who was imprisoned for criticizing the scorched-earth destruction of cultural artifacts by the Red Guards, the exhibition went ahead despite the Chinese government's renegeing on a promised loan of nearly 100 artworks. Vishakha N. Desai, then president of the Asia Society, blamed the timing—the year of the Beijing Olympics, when China wanted to focus attention on its progress and its aspirations. Ms. Chiu pulled off the exhibition with loans from private collectors.

More recently, the museum displayed works by Wu Guanzhong, illustrating his contemporary use of traditional Chinese ink painting, and "The Artful Recluse: Painting, Poetry, and Politics in 17th-Century China," which captured the moment between the Ming and the Qing dynasties when artists ignored political upheavals and focused on solace.

These kinds of exhibitions—which are more about history than about art history—have "no blueprint," Ms. Chiu says. And with just two curators, plus herself, to program the 8,000-square-foot space in New York plus, as of 18 months ago, two additional 4,000-square-foot galleries at branches in Houston and in Hong Kong, she has to reach out to scholars and independent curators. Once she decides on a topic, planning often begins with a colloquium on the idea and the artistic landscape surrounding it. Then, Ms. Chiu will hire experts to curate: For the Iran exhibit, she chose Fereshteh Daftari, formerly with the Museum of Modern Art and a curator of a 2002 exhibition of modern Iranian visual culture at the Grey Art Gallery, and Layla S. Diba, former curator of Islamic Art at the Brooklyn Museum and, during the 1970s, the director and chief curator of the Negarestan Museum in Tehran. But Ms. Chiu also traveled twice to Iran to see things for herself.

With more than 100 works by 26 artists, "Iran Modern" is sure to surprise. Among the artists Ms. Chiu believes "we'll see more of": Siah Armajani (b. 1939), whose "Shirt #1" (1958), a cloth-pencil-ink piece covered with prayers, is one of nine of his works in the show; Mohammad Ehsai (b. 1939), whose three modern adaptations of ancient Persian calligraphic works date to the late 1960s and early '70s; and Monir Shahrودي Farmanfarmaian (b. 1929), whose half-dozen shimmering mirror paintings were made in the '70s.

"Iran Modern" will probably travel to the Houston branch, though not to Hong Kong. Ms. Chiu is still puzzling over programming in those spaces. Originally, she thought they would simply take exhibits that originated in New York. But the audiences turned out to be different. Each city now has a local advisory committee. "We test to see if there is local interest," Ms. Chiu said. "Houston will probably share more with New York."

Ms. Chiu's job goes beyond running the Society's museum. As senior vice president of global arts and cultural programs, she has started the U.S.-China Museum Directors Forum, for example. Last November, 15 American museum directors traveled to Beijing to meet 15 of their counterparts to discuss how they might work together in exchanges of art, information, research and personnel; in partnerships for exhibitions, preservation and the like; and in other cultural initiatives that would foster greater understanding of each other's civilizations. They plan to reconvene in a broader group, open to more countries, at the Asia Society Hong Kong Center this November for an "Arts & Museum Summit." Ms. Chiu also collaborates with Asia Society staff on programs, discussions, performances, and so on.

The museum's position inside the Asia Society not only adds to its clout, but also "allows us to think differently," Ms. Chiu said, enabling the Asia Society Museum to beat its larger peers to the freshest ideas. With the new galleries in Houston and Hong Kong, and her ambitions to create an Asian arts-and-museum network, clout is starting to go in the other direction, too.

Ms. Dobzynski writes about culture for many publications and blogs at