

# MODERNISMS

IRANIAN, TURKISH, AND INDIAN HIGHLIGHTS FROM NYU'S ABBY WEED GREY COLLECTION



This publication accompanies the exhibition *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU's Abby Weed Grey Collection*, organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, and curated by Lynn Gumpert.

**DESIGN:** Larry Issa  
**TRANSLATION:** Ban Kattan  
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**NYUAD** رواق الفن  
**ARTGALLERY**

Saadiyat Island, PO Box 129188, Abu Dhabi, UAE  
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## INTRODUCTION

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What does it mean to be “modern”? In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century this question carried specific connotations for artists in Europe and the US: to break from the past—culturally and aesthetically—and to experiment and develop new methods for art and expression. Modernity connoted a set of aesthetic, philosophical, social, and political questions that emerged alongside industrialization, in the context of these European and North American cultures. In Europe and North America, the term “modernism” in art history traditionally refers to a specific period (pre-1960). Yet, as the plural title of this exhibition suggests, there are multiple “moderns” across the globe.

In the countries that Abby Weed Grey visited during her art-collecting journeys of the 1960s and early 1970s, artists were establishing their own vision of modern artistic practice. In some instances, rather than breaking with the past, this effort manifested as a break with the “West.” These artists were developing their own specific engagement with the questions of art rooted in where they were, and in dialogue with concerns of their global peers.

The collection of Abby Weed Grey comprises some of the most important modern artists from that

period and those regions. It is noteworthy that Grey, a widow from Minnesota, traveled regularly to Iran, Turkey, and India throughout the 1960s in a search for contemporary art—before today’s era of globetrotting art collectors. Even more noteworthy is the resulting collection, the importance of which has become clear as scholarship around these artists grows.

We are deeply honored to have the privilege of hosting *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU’s Abby Weed Grey Collection*. These regions each had their own engagement with key issues of modernity—and as art historians have begun to establish, there have been many “modernisms.”

NYU’s Grey Art Gallery, our sister institution, was created with Grey’s gift of her collection in 1975. Her goal was to promote international artistic exchange in an academic setting. Her mission unwittingly foreshadowed the founding vision of NYU Abu Dhabi, 35 years later. Bringing this exhibition here continues and expands the conversations Grey helped to begin.

Now, half a century after Abby Weed Grey collected this work, the artists and these works

have joined the art historical canons of these countries. *Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU’s Abby Weed Grey Collection* was curated by Lynn Gumpert, the Director of the Grey Art Gallery. The accompanying book delves into the histories of the collector and the region, and an array of scholars explore the questions raised by the exhibition. In the following pages we have reprinted Gumpert’s introductory essay for that book, which chronicles Grey’s development as a collector and supporter of art across cultures.

It is a delight to be able to present these works here. The visit of this exhibition allows us to continue our investigation of ideas at work in art, across time and place, in dialogue with our audience in the UAE.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our colleagues at the Grey. I owe a special debt to Lynn Gumpert (Director) and Michèle Wong (Head of Collections and Exhibitions). We continue to benefit from their wisdom, collaboration, and generosity. This magnificent exhibition would not have been possible without both of them, Abby Weed Grey, and, of course, the artists.

**Maya Allison**

*Executive Director, The NYUAD Art Gallery  
Chief Curator, NYU Abu Dhabi*



Eren Eyüboğlu,  
*Design for Mosaic*, 1957,  
Gouache and pencil on  
cardboard, 47.6 x 50.8 cm.  
Grey Art Gallery,  
New York University  
Art Collection. Gift  
of Abby Weed Grey

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Lynn Gumpert

## DIRECT DIALOGUES REFLECTIONS ON ABBY WEED GREY

In February 1997, a few weeks after I began working at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University's fine arts museum, Peter Chelkowski—a white-haired, dapper professor of Persian cultural history with a European accent and manners to boot—stopped by to introduce himself. Over lunch, he filled me in on Abby Weed Grey, the self-described “died-in-the-wool Midwesterner” who had founded the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center at NYU in 1975 and provided an endowment. She had also donated some 700 works of modern Asian and Middle Eastern art, the majority from Iran, Turkey, India, and Japan.<sup>1</sup> Chelkowski, as he told me, had studied in Cracow, at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and at Tehran University before moving to New York. The connecting link—between Chelkowski at NYU and Mrs. Grey in St. Paul, Minnesota—was *Sunrise Semester*, an educational television series that aired on CBS at 6 am on weekday mornings. A pioneer of distance learning, *Sunrise Semester* was produced in conjunction with NYU's College of Arts and Science. It had made its debut in 1957, before network television realized that this early morning slot could be monetized.<sup>2</sup>

In 1970 Chelkowski taught a class on Persian history for *Sunrise Semester*. Mrs. Grey woke up especially early to tune in on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. On a trip to New York City to visit her brother, Paul Weed—who was then vicar at St. Luke's in the Fields, an Episcopal church in Greenwich Village—Mrs. Grey invited Chelkowski to view slides from her numerous trips to Iran. A shared passion for art and Persian culture led to their friendship as well as her introduction to Richard Ettinghausen, then chairman of the Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>3</sup>

But what connection did Abby Weed Grey have to Iran? How did she come to amass the largest collection of Iranian works outside that country along with contemporary art from elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East? Although that story has been recounted multiple times, it bears retelling. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1902, Mrs. Grey attended Vassar College and then received a teaching certificate at Macalester College. After working for a year at a private school in St. Louis, she embarked on a summer trip to Europe. With an allowance of \$1,000 from her father, which was expected to last three



months, she managed to stretch her travels to eleven months—giving her, as she wrote in her autobiography, *The Picture Is the Window, The Window Is the Picture*, “exposure to the mysterious foreign atmosphere of Riga, Latvia, in its first days as a republic to the more sophisticated life of Paris in the 1920s.”<sup>4</sup> The Latvian sojourn, at the U.S. embassy there—the result of an unexpected invitation via her traveling companion—lasted five months and included attending a French literature course at the University of Riga.

At the age of 27, Abby Weed married Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Grey, a career army officer who was two decades older. She then spent the next twenty-seven years as an army wife, living at various posts across the United States.<sup>5</sup> In 1942, after Lt. Col. Grey’s retirement, the couple continued their modest, nomadic life, wintering most often in Florida, until his death, in 1956. Unbeknownst to Mrs. Grey, her husband had been investing in carefully researched railroad stocks, resulting in a sizable inheritance.

Mrs. Grey had been in the habit of keeping detailed journals, and she continued to do so for the rest of her life. In her mid-50s at the time of her husband’s death, she wrote of feeling a responsibility to use her “fortune” conscientiously. In 1961 she established the Ben and Abby Grey Foundation in order “to seek out artists, sponsor them, encourage

their creative expressions, and purchase their works for exhibition at some future time.”<sup>6</sup> She also detailed her increasing sense of isolation as well as her love of poetry and her fascination with visual art.

All these concerns and reflections came together in 1960, when she joined a group of fourteen women and embarked on a two-and-a half-month journey around the world. Reflecting back on her life, in the summer of 1980, she wrote:

I wanted to know artists . . . because I thought they were motivated by the same impulses as I—the need to make something out of their life experiences and pass it along to others. I like to think of myself as a poet/artist making something out of my own life material.

. . . I have collected many works of art with one purpose in mind—to understand the world I live in better than I did before and to communicate my sense of oneness with all artists and poets by encouraging them and gathering courage from them.<sup>7</sup>

Tehran was included in the group’s itinerary. Upon their arrival, Mrs. Grey managed to catch the last day of the Second Tehran Biennial. The exhibition, which she called “an eye opener” and surpassed everything

else she had seen on the trip thus far, ignited a life-long passion for the country and for its rich history and artistic traditions.<sup>8</sup>

While idealistic and, at times, naive, Mrs. Grey also held nuanced views on art. In May 1964 she organized an exhibition, “Deep Roots,” that was presented in a gallery she had constructed in her St. Paul home. In the introduction to the catalogue, she elaborated on her definition of what it means to be an artist and how works of art are perceived:

I think of the artist as a person working with prosaic materials—paint, canvas, wood, marble, iron, who turns it into poetry. Looking deeply into a work of art makes something happen to one’s own values and concepts. . . . A first glance yields the obvious, but, lived with more and more communiqués suggest themselves until one becomes aware not only of the obvious statements, but of extremely subtle ones. These are about another person, another time, another country, another culture, another living. Whatever values unfold, an awareness of life’s potential experiences develops within one’s self. Living becomes more complex and more marvelous; more

tragic and more exalted; more capable of hurting and solacing. The moral issue involved in living in our high-powered, high-pressured lives today seems to me to be this: we may not plead innocent. It is our obligation to keep our eyes open, to listen to the difficult and the unfamiliar, to be aware of values cherished or abhorred by others.<sup>9</sup>

Later she specified her mission for a round-the-world trip:

In India . . . I didn’t look for miniaturists or gem setters; in Iran, I didn’t look for rugmakers. In many places, I didn’t know where to look or exactly what to look for, but whatever it was going to be, it had to express the response of a contemporary sensibility to contemporary circumstances. In every country, I asked, “Where are your working artists? What are they doing? How are they breaking with the past to cope with the present?” I used every means I could think of: the native guides, the United States Embassy and United States Information Service (USIS), and I followed up leads from casual contacts and strangers.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next thirteen years, Mrs. Grey traveled the world, collecting contemporary works, primarily by non-Western artists, organizing exhibitions of American art abroad, and circulating shows by Iranian, Turkish, and Indian artists in the United States. In-depth analyses of her activities are put forth in the essays included in this volume. Susan Hapgood and Sarah-Neel Smith, for example, detail, respectively, the four trips each made by Mrs. Grey to India and Turkey.

Fereshteh Daftari and Shiva Balaghi address her extensive travels to Iran, the most to any one country. In the conversation transcribed here, I talk with Vishakha N. Desai, Vasif Kortun, and Hamed Yousefi about the social and cultural situations in Iran, Turkey, and India in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Cold War, of course, provided the overarching political context. We also observe that it is important to acknowledge what Mrs. Grey did not collect alongside what she acquired. Her motto, expressed throughout her writings and in the exhibitions she organized, is “one world through art.” As Hapgood, Smith, Yousefi, and Ali Mirsepassi all note, clearly her worldview was shaped, in part, by American cultural diplomacy. Mirsepassi and Yousefi, in their contribution, also examine how her championing of the Iranian Saqqakhaneh artists—including Parviz Tanavoli, Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi, and Faramarz Pilaram—corresponded “to certain Cold

War cultural imperatives, in particular, a romantic and pastoral worldview that sought authenticity in an imagined spiritual past [that was] promoted as a response to the threat of materialist ideologies (e.g., Communism).”<sup>11</sup> As Smith states succinctly, Mrs. Grey amassed her collection during “the shifting dynamics of the international Cold War at a moment when both the U.S. government and the American public increasingly came to consider what was interchangeably termed the ‘Near’ or ‘Middle’ East both a strategic component of the nation’s efforts to contain Soviet Communism and a vital source of the oil reserves that fueled Americans’ postwar lifestyles.”<sup>12</sup>

What remains evident, nonetheless, is that Abby Grey was prescient in her desire to collect non-Western contemporary art. And she took an ecumenical approach, trusting her instincts and, for Iran, often following the recommendations of Parviz Tanavoli, whom she brought to Minnesota for a residency at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and who later returned for a sabbatical at Hamline University in St. Paul.<sup>13</sup> About her acquisitions of modern art from India, Ranjit Hoskote in his contribution to this volume, astutely observes:

While the Grey collection initially appears to have been assembled idiosyncratically, reflecting the personal preoccupations of a private collector, in fact

this unique group of works embraces the diversity of artistic explorations, cultural alignments, and ideological perspectives that animated the Indian art scene as it unfolded between the 1940s and 1960s. . . . The Grey collection’s importance lies precisely in the exceptional opportunity it offers to savor the pre-canonical phase of the vibrant regional modernism that developed in India in the early decades after it achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1947.<sup>14</sup>

In her essay, Smith introduces some of the exhibitions the Grey Foundation assembled and circulated, both on its own and in collaboration with other organizations, such as the United States Information Agency (USIA), American Federation of the Arts (AFA), the Western States Art Association, and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Mrs. Grey’s exhibitions of contemporary art contrasted with those originating from larger institutions, such as “Two Decades of American Painting” (1967), a collaboration between the USIA and the Museum of Modern Art that purported a “we-talk-you-listen” approach. As Hapgood recounts, in conjunction with that show, Clement Greenberg gave a lecture in New Delhi in which he egregiously claimed that “traditional Indian pictorial art died 100

years ago,” a statement that understandably alienated the local arts community.<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Grey, in marked contrast, “sought to place American and foreign artists in direct dialogue and on equal footing.”<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Grey’s most ambitious exhibition was “One World Thru Art: A Selection of 1001 Works of Art from the Ben and Abby Grey Foundation,” which was installed in galleries constructed under the grandstand bleachers at the Minnesota State Fair. She booked them for weekends in June and July 1972 and settled on 1,001 works “since that seemed like a rather romantic Arabian Nights number.”<sup>17</sup> Nearly a million and a half people attended the fair, but only some 5,000 visited the exhibition. Reviews from local papers were glowing but did not appear until the final weekend. Both the exhibition catalogue and Mrs. Grey’s reminiscences in her autobiography reveal that the show was cleverly designed to highlight the numerous exhibitions she had previously organized, some circulated by the Grey Foundation and others by various institutions. The exhibition opened, for example, by reprising “14 Contemporary Iranian Artists,” the first show of modern Iranian art to travel in the United States for more than four years.<sup>18</sup> On view nearby were nearly sixty of Mrs. Grey’s later acquisitions: works by Tanavoli, Iranian crafts and folk art, and more contemporary Iranian paintings, sculpture, and works on paper. The next major grouping focused on India, beginning

with works that had been included in a circulating exhibition she had organized for the USIA and that combined pieces from India and Iran.<sup>19</sup> Batiks, folk art, and other Indian pieces followed. Two other sections reprised “Turkish Art Today,” with additional Turkish acquisitions, and “Contemporary Japanese Prints,” which had traveled for five years.

Featured next was a section called “International Art,” including Inuit prints and sculptures and works from Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ghana, Greece, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Kashmir, Lebanon, Mexico, Nepal, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Russia, Senegal, Spain, and Thailand—a truly heterogeneous mix. The third major section was devoted to Mrs. Grey’s American collection, beginning with prints from the “Minnesota Art Portfolio,” an exhibition that had circulated to various cities in Minnesota and was also her first show to travel abroad. The final three highlighted exhibitions were “Communication Through Art,” “Twenty Prints from the Grey Collection,” and “Ten Young American Artists.” The first had comprised both an exhibition and a key programmatic strategy of the Grey Foundation. Selected by three regional museum directors, twenty American prints were circulated abroad by the AFA along with a small library of books and lectures in the form of slide presentations.<sup>20</sup> “Ten Young Americans” had traveled in India and Iran.

Also shown in “One World Thru Art” were some hundred works by Clara Mairs, a local artist and friend of Mrs. Grey’s.<sup>21</sup> Interspersed in the catalogue were letters of support from the Iranian, Indian, Turkish, and Japanese embassies, again attesting to Mrs. Grey’s international cultural and diplomatic ambitions, along with the names of university presidents, museum directors, politicians, and other notable individuals who constituted the exhibition’s honorary committee and the foundation’s trustees.<sup>22</sup>

In the early 1970s, Mrs. Grey began to seek a permanent, institutional home for her collection, which she hoped to keep in Minnesota. Disappointed by a lack of interest on the part of the Walker Art Center, and after arrangements with the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Hamline University, and the St. Paul campus of the University of Minnesota fell through, she started looking farther afield. She approached Vassar College, her alma mater, as well as the State University of New York at Binghamton but found the latter’s location and relative inaccessibility daunting. Finally, with the encouragement of Peter Chelkowski, she donated her collection to New York University, thus founding the Grey Art Gallery and Study Center.<sup>23</sup> As first envisioned, the gallery, housed in NYU’s Main Building (now known as the Silver Center), was a highly ambitious project. In the catalogue of the Grey Art Gallery’s

Abby Weed Grey with  
sculptor Jack Schnier at  
Rasht 29, Tehran, 1967



“Inaugural Exhibition,” Kenneth L. Mathis, the gallery’s first director, states that it was intended to comprise not only an exhibition space but also a “suite of offices, a gallery-lounge, photographic and conservation laboratories, two lecture classrooms, a conference room, and storage and workshop facilities.”<sup>24</sup> Several years later, again with funding from Mrs. Grey, a fine arts library, slide collection, and reading room were created on the Main Building’s third floor, adjacent to NYU’s undergraduate department of art history. From the beginning, the focus of the Grey Art Gallery’s activities was its educational mission: to play a vital role in NYU’s interactions

with New York City and, in Mathis’s words, to foster innovative ways “for new learning, new ways of looking—and seeing.”<sup>25</sup>

The “Inaugural Exhibition” was mounted in two phases. The first, which opened in spring 1975, featured selections from the Abby Weed Grey collection. The second, which took place that fall, presented works from the New York University Art Collection, which had been founded in 1958 and consisted primarily of modern American and European art.<sup>26</sup> As Robert R. Littman, the Grey’s second director, notes in his conversation with Michèle Wong transcribed in this volume, the same space the Grey now occupies had previously housed the Gallery of Living Art, founded by Albert Eugene Gallatin (known as A. E.) in 1927 and later renamed the Museum of Living Art.<sup>27</sup> The great-grandson of NYU’s first president, Albert Gallatin, A. E. Gallatin was a debonair, passionate collector who had amassed impressive holdings of contemporary European art and successfully convinced his fellow trustees to create the first institution in New York to showcase work by living artists. Interestingly, the galleries where Gallatin’s collection was hung also functioned as study halls and were open late every night of the week, very much in keeping with Mrs. Grey’s concern that her collection be made available to students and researchers. Although the Museum of Living Art closed in 1942, it, along with the New

York University Art Collection, helped pave the way for NYU to house and maintain the Abby Weed Grey Collection of Modern Asian and Middle Eastern Art some four decades later.<sup>28</sup>

Following the “Inaugural Exhibition,” the gallery hosted the month-long “Lion Rugs from Fars,” a show drawn from Parviz Tanavoli’s collection. A year later, in 1976, the Grey presented “Parviz Tanavoli: 15 Years of Bronze Sculpture,” the first solo exhibition in the United States of the noted Iranian sculptor’s work, which included a number of pieces from the Grey collection. Accompanying Tanavoli’s show was a small exhibition of Persian locks drawn from his extensive personal holdings.<sup>29</sup> As Littman notes, in the mid-1970s and 1980s no one quite knew how to approach Mrs. Grey’s pioneering collection of non-Western art. Certainly, the discipline of art history has generally been slow to examine 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernism outside the dominant North American–Western European axis. With the exception of the “Abby Weed Grey Memorial Exhibition” (1983), not until 2002 did an exhibition feature works from her Iranian collection. That endeavor, “Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture,” originated in 1998 when colleagues at NYU’s Kevorkian Center and Department of Middle Eastern Studies proposed that the Grey Art Gallery host an exhibition of photographs by Abbas, an Iranian photojournalist then

living in Paris, to commemorate the upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. In keeping with the Grey’s mission to function as a museum-laboratory, I conceived a show that would juxtapose Abbas’s powerful images of Iran in the mid- to late 1970s with works by artists from the region made in the 1960s and early 1970s. Later, at the suggestion of scholar Shiva Balaghi, we added a selection of striking Iranian revolutionary posters. Fereshteh Daftari, then an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art, selected works from the Grey collection, recommended a few additional loans from her institution, and helped choose from among Abbas’s photographs. Over the following four years, Balaghi, then associate director of the Kevorkian Center and a cultural historian specializing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Iranian lithography, worked closely with the Grey to realize this ambitious project. She coedited the accompanying publication, *Picturing Iran: Art, Society, and Revolution*, which was envisioned less as a catalogue and more as an independent publication broaching the broader topic of visual culture and providing context to help Westerners better grasp the complex narrative of modern Iranian history. Two essays from this initial foray are reprinted here: Balaghi’s illuminating introductory text on Iranian modernity and Daftari’s seminal survey, the first comprehensive overview of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Iranian art published in English.

More than a decade later, in 2013, the Grey presented “Modern Iranian Art: Selections from the Abby Weed Grey Collection at NYU,” an exhibition of some thirty works organized to coincide with the Asia Society Museum’s impressive exhibition “Iran Modern.” This smaller show allowed us to reexamine some of the works presented earlier but also to conserve and exhibit others from the collection. Indeed, the primary factors that have prevented us from exhibiting more works from the Grey collection have been time, resources, and space. Most of the works require extensive and costly conservation and/or reframing. The Grey’s staff is small (I serve as both director and curator, for example), and, given the modest size of the gallery, we seldom enjoy the luxury of presenting selections from our permanent collection alongside temporary exhibitions. Nonetheless, we are making progress. In 2015, we organized the first exhibition devoted to the Grey’s Indian holdings. “Abby Grey and Indian Modernism: Selections from the NYU Art Collection” was curated by Susan Hapgood and Ranjit Hoskote, who both contributed important essays to the accompanying catalogue that are reprinted here.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the time seemed right to rediscover Mrs. Grey’s Indian collection and to commission new scholarship on her pioneering efforts. During the past decade, non-Western artists working outside the mainstream art world have received long-overdue

recognition, and more art historians are focusing on non-Western modernisms. Increasing numbers of exhibitions are being organized, not only in the artists’ countries of origin but also internationally. In addition, more solo exhibitions by key non-Western practitioners are being organized, enabling in-depth analyses of their contributions. During the run of “Abby Grey and Indian Modernism,” for example, the Grey mounted a curatorial project for the Armory Show—Modern, “Parviz Tanavoli: Selections from the NYU Art Collection,” featuring some twenty works of art.<sup>31</sup> Most recently, “Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran” (2016) focused on three generations of Iranian artists, including Tanavoli and Faramarz Pilaram, and examined how later Iranian artists drew inspiration from their predecessors as well as centuries-old Persian traditions while also participating in the broader discourse of global art.

Over the past two decades I have welcomed the opportunity to learn from the Grey collection and, happily, to benefit from the expertise of numerous colleagues. In this case, necessity presented a refreshing challenge, because even today relatively little information on Iranian and Turkish modern art is available, and most of what has been published is in Farsi or Turkish. India, in contrast, as a former British colony, has long been the focus of scholarship in English and, as Vishakha Desai comments in the conversation included here, its modern artists



were active participants in building the country’s post-independence identity.

The Asia Society’s “Iran Modern” exhibition, it should be noted, provided the first opportunity to view works from the Grey’s collection alongside a substantial number of other modern Iranian paintings, sculptures, and works on paper. Other than seeing the occasional piece in a private collection or in exhibitions of selected contemporary works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—two institutions that are now actively adding modern and contemporary works to their historical Islamic holdings—such occasions have been rare. Viewing “Iran Modern,” I was pleased to see how the Grey collection’s works held their own.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, while modern Indian art has long been featured in international auctions and a few New York galleries, museums have, for the most part, been slow to respond. The exception in the United States is the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, home to the Herwitz Family Collection. And in “Modernisms” we are thrilled to present—for the first time since the “Inaugural Exhibition” back in spring 1975—a substantial number of our modern Turkish works. To the best of our knowledge, the Grey’s collection of Turkish modern art is the largest held by any institution outside that country.

In her extensive diaries, which she called “daybooks,” Mrs. Grey often posed deep questions. “Is it enthusiasm that makes reality?” she wrote in 1949. “Or the will that enforces the cleaning up and digging of ditches. . . . Reality is obvious to common sense people. But it is not to enchanters, miracle-makers, bead-tellers, poetical persons, of which I am one.”<sup>33</sup> And yet, at the same time she was pondering these existential issues and engaging in cultural diplomacy, observations about political conditions abroad make scant appearances. In a trip to Isfahan in 1965, she visited a carpet factory where “the fingers of little girls manipulate the strings of the warp so quickly that they twang faintly like a harp. . . . It is true, as they say, that when you walk on a beautiful carpet you are walking on the eyes of children. Where is their childhood and where is their future?” Immediately before the factory visit, bricks had been thrown at her and her sister by an impoverished protester, most likely an “over-zealous sufi,” objecting to something that remained mysterious.<sup>34</sup> Two years later, in Tehran, she witnessed a prisoner tied to a mounted policeman “who had to run at a good pace to keep up with the horse or be dragged over the stony road. . . . I wondered whether other things of which I was not aware were going on under the surface.”<sup>35</sup> In 1967, back in Tehran, she was dismayed to learn from a clergyman

that “the Christian church must do something. Education and the study of comparative religions is [sic] creating a vacuum in the beliefs of young intellectuals.” In hindsight, while working on her autobiography, she observed that the Iranian Revolution would soon fill any vacuums, overtaking all others and making Americans unwelcome.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, with an unwavering commitment to her belief in “one world through art,” she made things happen. By reconciling vision with reality and pursuing her own particular viewpoint despite setbacks and obstacles, Mrs. Grey made a difference.

In her relentless quest to query and observe, Abby Weed Grey not only was a dedicated diarist, but she also had the mindset of an archivist. She meticulously maintained files and records for the Grey Foundation and kept and filed receipts, brochures, and catalogues, along with photographs, press clippings, and other materials collected during her travels. Given the paucity of 20<sup>th</sup>-century archives in Iran, Turkey, and India, these materials—today housed in the New York University Archives—provide a treasure trove for scholars eager to consult primary sources. Thus it is safe to say that Mrs. Grey ultimately succeeded in her mission—not only to collect works of contemporary art from non-Western countries but also to make them available to scholars and students who will learn from them and help propel her visionary project into the future.

## Notes

1. Included among the nearly 700 works are some 200 from Iran, 110 from Turkey, 80 from India, and 80 Japanese woodblock prints. The bulk of the collection was given to NYU in 1974; the remainder came after Mrs. Grey’s death in 1983.
2. See Rosanna Noelle Flouty, *Centralized, Decentralized, Distributed: Disruptive Technology in Distance Education, from Sunrise Semester to Present-Day MOOCs*, PhD diss., CUNY, 2016. My thanks to Dr. Flouty for briefing me on Sunrise Semester.
3. Abby Weed Grey, *The Picture Is the Window, The Window Is the Picture* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), pp. 260–61.
4. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
5. Ibid., pp. 12–13.
6. Ibid., pp. 14–15.
7. “A Letter from Mrs. Grey,” *Grey Art Gallery Bulletin* 4, no. 4 (Summer 1980), p. 7.
8. Grey, *The Picture Is the Window*, p. 43.
9. Abby W. Grey, “Introduction,” *Deep Roots*, May 1964, n.p. This “catalogue” appears to be more of an artist’s book; it measures 13 by 4 inches and is attached at the top with two grommets. According to Mrs. Grey’s penciled notation on the cover, it was the “1<sup>st</sup> show in my ‘own’ Gallery (upstairs) [and] ‘devised’ by Sia [sic] Armajani.” I found this document in the Grey’s artists’ files. The show featured works by the following Turkish and Iranian artists along with their biographies and statements (in order of appearance in the catalogue): Jannis Spyropoulos, Alkis Ginnis, Cemil Eren, Abidin Elderçölu, Eroumend Kalik, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Sohrab Sepehri, and Parviz Tanavoli. Interestingly, the catalogue seems to have been composed on a typewriter; multiple letter l’s frame the text, and all letters are lowercase. Tanavoli’s entry is much longer than the others and, although not attributed, seems to have been written by Mrs. Grey. Apparently a page is missing, because the biography is interrupted by what appears to be Tanavoli’s artist’s statement.
10. Grey, *The Picture Is the Window*, pp. 15–16. USIS refers to the international service arm of the USIA (United States Information Agency).

11. See Ali Mirsepassi and Hamed Yousefi, “Abby Weed Grey’s Journey to the East: Iranian Modernity During the Cold War,” in this volume, p. 66.
12. See Sarah-Neel Smith, “Forgotten Geographies of Artistic Diplomacy: Abby Weed Grey and U.S.–Middle East Exchanges in the 1960s,” in this volume, p. 124.
13. Tanavoli arrived in Minnesota as a visiting artist at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in February 1962. (His visa was delayed and he didn’t arrive in time to teach the fall 1961 semester). His stay was extended another two years, during which he taught sculpture classes; he returned to Tehran in May or June 1964. During this time, he helped organize a show of graphic work, “14 Contemporary Iranian Artists,” which, after opening in Minneapolis, was circulated for four years by the Western Association of Art Museums. Mrs. Grey then donated those prints to Tehran’s Damavand College for Women (which apparently closed in early 1979). See *The Picture Is the Window*, pp. 74–75.
14. See Ranjit Hoskote, “The Disordered Origins of Things: The Art Collection as Pre-canonical Space,” in this volume, p. 211.
15. See Susan Hapgood, “The Vicissitudes of Cultural Exchange: Abby Weed Grey and Indian Modernism,” in this volume, p. 195, citing Devika Singh, “A Modern Formation? Circulating International Art in India 1950s–1970s,” in Shanay Jhaveri, ed., *Western Artists and India: Creative Inspirations in Art and Design* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2013), p. 52. See also Smith, “Forgotten Geographies,” referencing Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books), 2005, p. 275; and Margaret Cogswell, “Communication Through Art,” *AFA Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1964), p. 18, reprinted in *One World Thru Art* (Minneapolis: Ben and Abby Grey Foundation, 1972), pp. 58–59. Mrs. Grey also collaborated with the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to sponsor the Second India Triennale of Contemporary Art in New Delhi in 1971. (Ever frugal, Mrs. Grey first approached the Whitney and Guggenheim Foundations to get more funding).

16. See Smith, “Forgotten Geographies,” p. 127.
17. Grey, *The Picture Is the Window*, p. 246.
18. Grey, *One World Thru Art*, pp. 14–15.
19. Ibid., pp. 24–25.
20. Cogswell, “Communication through Art,” pp. 16–20.
21. Mairs’s works were donated to the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery of St. Catherine University, Minneapolis–St. Paul. Other Minnesota works were given to the Minnesota Museum of Art and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. See also “St. Paul’s Mary Griggs Burke, Abby Weed Grey, and Aimee Mott Butler: Three Extraordinary Women Who Supported Art and Artists,” *Ramsey County History Magazine* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2018), p. 6.
22. Trustees included Margaret (Peg) Cogswell; Arnold Herstand, president of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design; and Paul L. Berg, an Episcopal priest. Honorary committee members included Hubert H. Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Richard Ettinghausen, Martin Friedman (director of the Walker Art Center), and Joshua C. Taylor (director of the National Collection of Fine Arts, now the Smithsonian Museum of American Art). See *One World Thru Art*, p. 11.
23. Grey, *The Picture Is the Window*, pp. 259–61. Later the esteemed art historian H. W. Janson and Ruth Bowman, the NYU Art Collection’s first curator, visited Mrs. Grey in St. Paul, reviewed the collection, and recommended that NYU accept the works and the endowment.
24. Kenneth L. Mathis, “Foreword,” *Inaugural Exhibition*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, pp. 5–6. Mathis also praises the architects William C. Shopsin and Giorgio Cavaglieri for their transformation of the Main Building’s interior space by “modern lighting and strips of smoked mirror” along with “moveable exhibition panels.” Another feature was a “study-storage gallery which functions in much the same way as a reference library.” The original entrance to the Grey Art Gallery, at 33 Washington Place, was moved to 100 Washington Square East in 1996, when the Main Building’s ground floor was renovated to make room for Hemmerdinger Hall.

25. Mathis, *Inaugural Exhibition*, p. 5.
26. For more on the New York University Art Collection, see Lynn Gumpert, “Direct, Frequent, and Sustained Contact: A History of the NYU Art Collection,” in Pepe Karmel, ed., *New York Cool: Painting and Sculpture from the NYU Art Collection* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2008).
27. Founded in 1927, A. E. Gallatin’s Gallery of Living Art predated both the Museum of Modern Art (1929) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (1931). As Gallatin became increasingly concerned that his standing in the art world was being diminished by these larger institutions, he changed its name in 1936 to the Museum of Living Art. See the Grey Art Gallery website, <https://greyart-gallery.nyu.edu/2016/05/e-gallatin-museum-living-art/>, and Debra Bricker Balken, “The Park Avenue Cubists: Gallatin, Morris, Frelinghuysen, and Shaw,” in *The Park Avenue Cubists: Gallatin, Morris, Frelinghuysen and Shaw* (London and New York: Ashgate and Grey Art Gallery, 2002).
28. In December 1942, NYU decided to use the exhibition space as a library processing facility. The Museum of Modern Art approached Gallatin, who decided to give his collection to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He was encouraged in doing so by the PMA’s director, Fiske Kimball, who knew the collection when he was the first Samuel F. B. Morse Professor at NYU.
29. Tanavoli is also known as a major collector and scholar of Persian decorative and folk arts. His collection of steel artifacts, for example, has been the subject of a major scholarly study. See James Allan and Brian Gilmour, *Persian Steel: The Tanavoli Collection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the Board of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University, and the British Institute of Persian Studies, 2000).
30. *Abby Grey and Indian Modernism* is available online at <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/publications/abby-grey-and-indian-modernism-selections-from-the-nyu-art-collection/>. This publication was used as a textbook for art history classes at NYU, thus fulfilling the Grey Art Gallery’s educational mission as well as Mrs. Grey’s wish to make her artworks more accessible.

31. We thank Debbie Harris for the invitation to participate and for producing the small brochure that accompanied the project. At the same time, Lisa Fischman and Shiva Balaghi coorganized “Parviz Tanavoli” at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, only the second solo American museum exhibition of his work. See Fischman and Balaghi, *Parviz Tanavoli* (Wellesley, MA: Davis Museum, Wellesley College, 2015).
32. For more on exhibitions featuring collections of Iranian art, see my introduction to *Global/Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran*, ed. Lynn Gumpert (New York: Grey Art Gallery, 2016), pp. 9–31.
33. Epigraph to Grey, “Diary 1: Around the World 1960,” in *The Picture Is the Window*, p. 21.
34. Grey, *The Picture Is the Window*, p. 69.
35. Ibid., p. 161.
36. Ibid., pp. 171–72. Mrs. Grey was a devout Episcopalian and, during her 1961 visit to Isfahan, met Anglican Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti; his British wife, Margaret; and his children. They developed a close friendship and, later, Mrs. Grey purchased property, dubbed “Abby’s Garden,” for the family on the city’s outskirts. More research is needed on this friendship—sadly, in 1980, the couple’s son Bahram was killed by revolutionaries in Tehran. The youngest daughter, Guli Francis-Dehqani and Mrs. Grey’s goddaughter, was appointed Bishop of Loughborough in 2017. I thank Shirin Ward for sharing her memories of her family and Mrs. Grey in July 2018.



Parviz Tanavoli  
*Heech*, 1972  
bronze on wood base, 56.5 x 30.5 x 20.3 cm.  
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection.  
Gift of Abby Weed Grey  
© Parviz Tanavoli

## IRAN

Abby Weed Grey first visited Iran in 1960 as part of an around-the-world tour. Determined to find art that expressed, in her words, “the response of a contemporary sensibility to contemporary circumstances,” she returned seven more times, acquiring nearly 200 works by Iranian artists—the largest component of her collection. The 1960s and ’70s saw great artistic productivity fostered, in part, by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his wife, Queen Farah Pahlavi, whose government actively supported cultural initiatives, including the Tehran Biennial (1958–66), the annual Shiraz Arts Festival (1967–77), and the founding of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMoCA; opened October 1977). At the time, many of Iran’s intellectuals and artists were participating in various movements and experiments in an effort to develop modern, secular, and radical visions for the nation.

In the late 1950s, some Iranian artists began drawing directly on their cultural heritage, infusing Persian imagery and symbols with modern concepts and meanings. This new movement—dubbed “Saqqakhaneh” by critic Karim Emami in reference to Iran’s ubiquitous, highly decorated sacred water

fountains—strove to reconceive Iranian contemporary art. Some Saqqakhaneh artists were teachers or students in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Tehran, the country’s preeminent art institution, and they exchanged ideas there as well as at gathering spaces such as Rasht 29 and Atelier Kaboud.

Searching for innovative artists, Mrs. Grey was captivated by Saqqakhaneh reinterpretations of traditional motifs, which she first encountered in 1960 at the Second Tehran Biennial, and—on the advice of artist Parviz Tanavoli—quickly acquired multiple works by the movement’s key practitioners. She also purchased pieces by Tehran-born Siah Armajani who was living in Minnesota and experimenting with the depiction of calligraphy and language in his work. Fulfilling her dream of stimulating cross-cultural exchange, Mrs. Grey circulated exhibitions of her collection throughout the U.S., sponsored a residency for Tanavoli at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD), and even established a bronze foundry at the University of Tehran—thus encouraging the burgeoning modern art scene both in Iran and abroad in the years leading up to the 1979 Revolution.



Maqbool Fida Husain  
*Virgin Night*, 1964  
oil on canvas, 101 x 74.9 cm.  
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art  
Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey

## INDIA

On her trips to India, Abby Weed Grey explored the vital art scenes that flourished in the decades following the country’s independence from British rule in 1947. She traveled there four times between 1960 and 1968, and collected some 80 artworks. In India, as in every place she visited, she sought artists who, as she stated in her memoir, were “breaking with the past to cope with the present” and whose works “best marked the advance from tradition to a contemporary view.” The innovations she encountered in India met these criteria. In the wake of independence, artists adapted to the vastness and diversity of their newly sovereign nation. Departing from the traditions of both colonialism and a nationalist art movement, they sought to form fresh identities. A wide range of styles from many social, political, and formal perspectives emerged.

In New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay), artists who were experimenting with various approaches formed the nation’s first modernist schools. Members of the influential Progressive Artists Group (PAG) looked outward to other cultures in an effort to invent an artistic language for India that was international but also local. Although the group lacked a specific

style, many of its practitioners rebelled against realism and brought together themes from India’s rich artistic history with Cubist and Expressionist elements. Mrs. Grey was drawn to these artists as well as to practitioners of the Baroda Group, who were resisting formalist decrees by integrating both Indian and Western motifs and forms, and to Neo-Tantric painters whose semi-abstract works reflected universal concepts of spirituality, nature, and mysticism. She also acquired works by artists associated with the Delhi Silpi Chakra (Delhi Sculptors’ Circle) and the Kala Bhavan art school of Santiniketan, whose hybrid practices, too, contributed to the nation’s artistic transformation.

Mrs. Grey ardently engaged with the country’s cultural initiatives. She circulated an exhibition there of prints by American artists and supported the First and Second India Triennales (1968 and 1971) by helping fund American participation. She also mounted exhibitions by Indian artists in the U.S., initiating important cross-cultural exchanges and offering us—through her vibrant and complex collection—a kaleidoscopic glimpse into the Indian art world of the 1960s.





Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu  
*Full Moon*, 1961  
oil and glue on canvas, 129.2 x 106.7 cm  
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art  
Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey

## TURKEY

In 1961, Abby Weed Grey traveled to Turkey in the course of her first independent international trip. Fascinated by what she found there, she returned three times to visit the country's vanguard artists in their studios, ultimately purchasing nearly 110 works. Her travels to Turkey took place during a turbulent period in the country's history, book-ended by military coups. The first coup, in 1960, was marked by the rise of socialist activism and working-class movements. With industrialization booming, rural populations started flocking to urban centers. And while the visual arts in Turkey in the 1930s and '40s were closely aligned to nation-building, the '60s saw a wider range of expression from younger and radical artists as well as older and classical ones.

In Turkey Mrs. Grey spent most of her time in Istanbul and in Ankara, the country's capital. In both cities, she met artists associated with the two main art schools: The Istanbul Fine Arts Academy and Ankara's Gazi Education Institute. Many of these artists had been members of Group D (D Grubu; 1933–1951), a collective of Istanbul's modernist visionaries who had campaigned against

the former generation's Realist and Impressionist styles in favor of Cubist and Expressionist idioms, and were now established figures in the Turkish art scene. Other artists looked to Turkish folk culture, depicting village life and labor through the lens of the country's urban migrants. The geometric and curvilinear designs of Turkish ornamentation, architecture, and calligraphy were yet another source of inspiration, especially for those who had studied abstraction in Paris, and who were synthesizing these stylistic influences into images that privileged form over meaning.

Drawing on her own collection and her vast network of international artists, Mrs. Grey organized a series of cultural initiatives, including *Turkish Art Today*, which traveled across the U.S. in the 1960s. Works from this exhibition were also included in her most extensive and lavish production, *One World Thru Art: A Selection of 1001 Works of Art from the Ben and Abby Grey Foundation*, which was on view at the Minnesota State Fair in 1972. This show featured works by Middle Eastern and Asian artists as well as by Americans, a truly cross-cultural endeavor that exemplified Mrs. Grey's vision of an interconnected universe.



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