

## Notes to editor

### Background

Of the nearly 5,800 works housed at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University's fine arts museum, approximately 700 comprise the Abby Weed Grey Collection of Modern Asian and Middle Eastern Art. This collection—an unparalleled and unique art historical resource—represents some of the largest institutional holdings of Iranian and Turkish modern art, and the foremost trove of modern Indian art in an American university museum. Along with an endowment to establish the Grey Art Gallery, the collection was donated to New York University in 1974 by Abby Weed Grey (1902–1983), a self-described “dyed-in-the-wool Midwesterner” from St. Paul, Minnesota. In the 1960s and early '70s, when few other American collectors were attuned to art being made in the Middle East and Asia, Mrs. Grey traveled extensively in these regions, steadily acquiring works by contemporary local artists. Intent on self-education and optimistically embracing the notion of “one world through art,” she believed firmly in the power of art to stimulate dialogues between people of different cultures. This vision arose at a moment when, due to the shifting dynamics of the Cold War, America held a broader interest in fostering intercultural dialogue that was motivated, in part, by foreign policy strategy.

Although works from the collection have been shown at the Grey on numerous previous occasions—in exhibitions such as *Global Local 1960–2015: Six Artists from Iran* (2016), *Abby Grey and Indian Modernism: Selections from the NYU Art Collection* (2015), *Modern Iranian Art* (2013), and *Between Word and Image: Modern Iranian Visual Culture* (2002)—selections from the Iranian, Turkish, and Indian modern art holdings have never been presented together in a cross-cultural study. Bringing together works from three different countries, *Modernisms* will make significant contributions to current dialogues which are actively seeking to expand narrow, Eurocentric narratives of modern art.

### Iran

Comprising nearly 200 works, the Grey Art Gallery's holdings of modern Iranian art constitute the largest component of Abby Grey's collection. In 1960, as part of her around-the-world tour, Mrs. Grey visited Iran, where she attended the Second Tehran Biennial. The Iran she encountered was rich with creativity and intellectual discourse. Ali Mirsepassi and Hamed Yousefi note in an essay in the exhibition's publication that “Iranian intellectuals and artists participated in various movements and experiments as they sought to craft diverse modern, secular, and radical visions for the nation.” Captivated by what she saw, Mrs. Grey subsequently made seven additional visits to Iran, seeking art that would “express the response of a contemporary sensibility to contemporary circumstances.” She found this innovation in work by members of the Saqqakhaneh school, such as **Parviz Tanavoli**, **Faramarz Pilaram**, **Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi**, and their peers. These artists sought to reinterpret Iran's rich traditions of calligraphy, architecture, and ornamentation in contemporary idioms. For instance, Tanavoli rooted much of his work in Iranian folklore, but developed a new

pictorial language to recast traditional stories as modern sculptures. Pílará drew on the awe-inspiring architectural components of the mosques of Isfahan, the city of his birth, but merged them with bodily fragments to create hybrid designs. Zenderoudi referenced Shiite iconography and Persian calligraphy in his oeuvre but transformed them into abstract, flowing forms. “The major departure from earlier modernist works,” explains scholar Fereshteh Daftari, “lay not only in the representation of indigenous subject matter but also in the expression of a vernacular culture with its own visual means and lexicon.” Despite the primacy of Saqqakhaneh works in the Grey collection, Mrs. Grey also acquired works by other Iranian artists, such as **Siah Armajani**, who emigrated to Minnesota in 1960, and whose works in the collection are informed by depictions of language and the pictorial relationship between word and image. Also included in the Grey collection is a floral monotype by **Monir Farmanfarmaian**, who spent most of her career in New York (where she learned printmaking techniques from Milton Avery), and is best known for her mirrored works that recall Iranian mosaics. Like the Saqqakhaneh school, these artists grappled with questions of how to reconcile their contemporary sensibilities with their Persian heritage.



Bedri Rahmi Eyübođlu (Turkish)  
*Full Moon*, 1961  
Oil and glue on canvas, 50 7/8 x 42 in.  
Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art  
Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey,  
G1975.293

## Turkey

Mrs. Grey made her first visit to Turkey in 1961, inaugurating a lifelong fascination with Turkish modernism. By the end of that year, she had begun collecting Turkish works with the intention of exhibiting them in the United States. Abby Grey returned to Turkey three more times—in 1964, 1965, and 1969—to visit the studios and salons of the country’s rising vanguard artists, ultimately purchasing nearly 110 works. While there, she met many Group D artists, including **Abindin Eldergolu** and **Bedri Rahmi Eyübođlu**, two among a veritable roster of Istanbul’s modernist visionaries who sought to cast off earlier styles and aesthetics—such as Impressionism and Western academic styles—in favor of art representing a new Turkey, one that would embody both Turkish consciousness and international awareness. In his quest to create a uniquely Turkish modernism, Eldergolu looked to the native abstract art of calligraphy, thus foregrounding conceptual connections between local Turkish artistic forms and international modernist abstract art. *Eyübođlu* looked for inspiration to Turkey’s rich pastoral life, often portraying farms and peasant activities. Other Turkish artists of this time, such as **Nevzat Akoral**, depicted scenes of village life and labor through the lens of Turkey’s many urban migrants. In contrast, **Fahrelnissa Zeid** looked to another kind of Turkish heritage—the geometric and curvilinear forms of Turkish ornamentation and architecture—which she incorporated into her often recondite images. “The mythos of the rural that was so central to 20th-century Turkish art,” writes Sarah-Neel Smith, “contrasts with works in Grey’s collection that speak to processes of migration and urbanization, which began in the 1950s and reached a fever pitch



Maqbool Fida Husain (Indian)  
*Virgin Night*, 1964  
Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 29 1/2 in.  
Grey Art Gallery, New York  
University Art Collection. Gift of  
Abby Weed Grey, G1975.158

in the 1960s.” The multitude of styles found in the Grey Art Gallery’s Turkish collection reflects the great diversity of expression that constitutes Turkey’s modernist scene.

### India

Strongly drawn to the innovations she found in India, Abby Grey traveled there four times during the 1960s. She collected some 80 artworks, comprising what scholar Ranjit Hoskote calls a “unique group of works [that] 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.” In New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay), Mrs. Grey encountered artists who, in the wake of their country’s independence from British rule, began experimenting with new approaches, forming the nation’s first modernist schools. Several works she acquired were by members of the influential Progressive Artists Group (PAG), which broke away from the traditional Indian nationalist art movement to form an avant-garde collective that looked outward to other cultures and drew inspiration from abroad. Clearly embracing cultural hybridity, **Maqbool Fida Husain** blended cubism and

expressionism with traditional Indian iconography to create his own vocabulary of darkly expressive forms. **Francis Newton Souza**, founder of PAG, often combined deconstructed human forms with Hindu iconography, merging outside influences with local religious imagery. Mrs. Grey also collected works by some of the more experimental artists working in India who have been overlooked in the West until now, but who were also seeking ways to incorporate modern techniques. One such artist, **Prabhakar Barwe**, combined Tantric styles culled from his time spent in Varanasi, India’s holiest city, with abstract symbolism largely inspired by the work of Paul Klee. Ultimately, Mrs. Grey’s keen eye and passion resulted in a collection of Indian art that highlights and celebrates a complex but often heretofore disregarded modernism.