
Archive: Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

In Tehran, *Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian* reigns as the doyenne of contemporary Iranian art. Only at the age of 93, however, has her work found a permanent home: her own museum—the first in Iran dedicated to a solo female artist. She reflects on her life and career with *Charles Shafaieh*.



'I imagined myself standing inside a many-

faceted diamond and looking out at the sun.'

Retirement has little attraction for Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, the 93-year-old grande dame of Iranian contemporary art. At her Tehran studio, she leads a small team of men who help her to design and construct her mirror mosaic sculptures, many of which are now in the permanent collections of arts institutions worldwide, such as The Guggenheim in New York City and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. She has a diverse oeuvre—drawing, textiles, jewelry, collages, memory boxes and even pieces done with the help of honeybees. But Farmanfarmaian is most lauded for her singular neo-traditionalist innovations of a centuries-old Iranian artistic practice in which tiny pieces of glass, some colored by hand, are set together onto plaster in predetermined geometric patterns. The resulting works, from small mirror spheres (inspired by watching young children playing soccer) to large decagons and triangles, shimmer with dazzling surfaces, refracting the light and painting their surroundings with glittering, fragmentary reflections.

This effect evokes a foundational experience for Farmanfarmaian's art. "In the late 1950s, I went to Shiraz with Robert Morris and Marcia Hafif and took them to the Shah-e-Cheragh shrine," she writes from Tehran, recalling that transcendent event shared with her friends, two of America's pre-eminent minimalist artists. The Shia funerary shrine and mosque, whose name roughly translates to "King of Light," is renowned for its interior comprised of millions of small pieces of mirrored glass. As

she describes in her 2007 memoir, *A Mirror Garden*, co-written with Zara Houshmand, "the very space seemed on fire, the lamps blazing in hundreds of thousands of reflections. I imagined myself standing inside a many-faceted diamond and looking out at the sun...It was a universe unto itself, architecture transformed into performance, all movement and fluid light, all solids fractured and dissolved in brilliance, in space, in prayer. I was overwhelmed." At that point, she began contemplating bringing this experience, usually relegated to palaces and religious sites, to the homes of Iranians and others alike.

A decade later, a serendipitous encounter led to her first mirror-based pieces. In Tehran, her husband's friend was decorating his house with mirror work, and when she went to visit the construction site, she met Hajj Ostad Navid, a master artisan leading the project. Though Farmanfarmaian had to beg Hajj Ostad Navid to convince him that he should help a woman in her artistic endeavors, he eventually acquiesced. And they had a fruitful partnership that was instrumental in realizing the designs Farmanfarmaian had first conjured in dreams. This initial chauvinistic response has repeated itself throughout her career, but she does not dwell. She says, "the master I hired after coming back to Tehran in 2004 did not want to work with me either, but he got used to me. It has been difficult sometimes, to work with men who think that women are not very knowledgeable, but over time, they've understood that perhaps I do have some sense of art

and design." Farmanfarmaian's life has been punctuated by many other serendipitous encounters. Born in 1924 in Qazvin, she attended the University of Tehran's Fine Arts College but left quickly out of a desire for a different education. She was determined to go to Paris, inspired by a French professor who had shown works by Gauguin and others to her and her classmates. But in 1944, the Second World War made such travel impossible. So instead she took a circuitous three-month journey to America (with documentation stating she was a nurse) via India and Australia, facilitated by Donald Wilber, a scholar of Iranian history. She found out much later that Wilber was also a CIA operative who helped mount the 1953 Iranian coup d'état that reinstalled the Shah.

"I arrived in New York City in 1945 and stayed for over 12 years," she says. Studying first at Cornell University and later at the Parsons School of Design, Farmanfarmaian "met many American artists—Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol." A number of these connections occurred at the Eighth Street Club and the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, notable artistic haunts. Art critics often insist on finding continuity between Farmanfarmaian's work and these abstract expressionists and pop artists, but she withholds comment on their possible aesthetic ties. "I did not consider myself an artist back then. The connections I made were on a personal level rather than an artistic one."



Previous spread: Monir at home in Tehran in 1975. Right: The artist and her relief work in the 1970s.

A notable exception was Milton Avery, a successor to Matisse and friend of Rothko's and other abstract expressionists. As with so many of Farmanfarmaian's friendships, an element of luck was crucial to their meeting, though her warm and playful personality—on full display in Bahman Kiarostami's recent documentary *Monir*—no doubt helped. "Milton was one of my neighbors in Woodstock, where I would rent a cottage every summer while living in New York," she recalls. "He would walk over to my home and make drawings. He was very good and taught me to make monotypes. When I returned to Iran, my first exhibition in 1958 was of monotype flowers based on the technique I learned from him." That same year, those pieces would win a gold medal at the Venice Biennale.

"I'm a visual person," she says. "I always look for things to marvel at, be they found in nature or in art." After Farmanfarmaian returned to Iran in 1956 following her second marriage, it was her encounters traveling across the country that molded her principal aesthetics. In part, these excursions related to her job for the Point Four program, a Marshall Plan initiative that entailed positioning traditional Iranian crafts for foreign markets. "In the 1970s," she says, "I took many trips to the countryside and bought Qajar coffeehouse paintings, stained glass windows, Safavid doors, hand-carved Turkoman jewelry and other folk art from houses scheduled for destruction—in order to preserve this heritage." Her exhaustive collection was seized during the revolution, however, along with her contemporary art. She had gifts from Alexander Calder and others, including a Warhol "Marilyn Monroe" that still has her address on its back and was recently sold at Sotheby's.

While Farmanfarmaian rarely elaborates on her own work, she explains its basic foundations. "I start with the point, which opens up to the circle," she says. "From there, you can divide the circle into

three points to a triangle, four points to a square, five to a pentagon, and all the way up to 12-sided forms." An underlying structure to much of her work is her system of infinite possibility, of shapes divided into an endless series of other shapes, which draws upon the complex cosmology of the Sufi tradition in Islam. Farmanfarmaian is less driven by philosophical theories than many of her peers, including other geometry-minded artists like Piet Mondrian. "My work explores the relation between arcane symbols and geometrical shapes. For example, the triangle represents human consciousness, the square the four directions, and 12 is the zodiac—the 12 stars in the universe."

While Josef Albers loved squares, Farmanfarmaian focuses on the hexagon. She has previously explained that the shape has "many meanings. Its six sides can be representative of the directions: forward, backward, right, left, up, and down; as well as the six virtues: generosity, self-discipline, patience, determination, insight and compassion." Ubiquitous in Persian art and architecture, from mosques to carpets, hexagons also attract Farmanfarmaian for their ease of divisibility and the gapless bonds they form with each other.

Drawing has always been a central part of Farmanfarmaian's work, though for decades her drawings were ignored as secondary to her mirror work. In fact, in 1953 she drew the original Persian violet that was used as the symbol of Bonwit Teller, the celebrated New York department store. She was paid all of \$150 for it by an agent who didn't disclose his client's name. Interestingly, she was actually working for Bonwit Teller at the time as a layout designer (and had befriended a co-worker, Andy Warhol). Now to Farmanfarmaian's delight, her works on paper receive attention not as mere preparatory sketches or idle doodles but as an independent body of work. Featuring just colored felt-tip markers or a Chinese brush, they take on a freer form.



Above: Monir working in her Tehran studio on a sculpture that she later titled *Heptagon Star* in 1975.

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“My flower drawings, in particular, are much less premeditated,” she says. “The lines are almost calligraphic, and I let them flow unselfconsciously, often unbroken from start to finish.”

Other geometric drawings, related in form to her mirror work, are more regimented but exude a sense of freedom and sprightliness impossible in her sculptures. Though flat, these abstract works’ coloration and often sheer profusion of lines and shapes create the illusion of three dimensions.

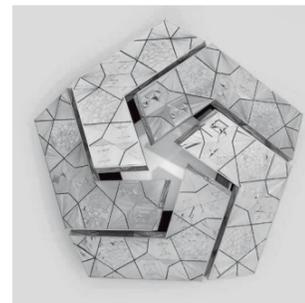
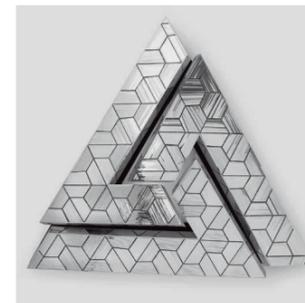
Drawing was a medium in which Farmanfarmaian could work without assistants while exiled in New York City following the revolution. This was also the period when she created her *Heartaches* memory box series, filled with family photographs and other personal ephemera, following the death of her husband in 1991.

Though she spent decades abroad, by choice and not, exile does not define her work. It is Iranian in the sense that Farmanfarmaian has preserved some classical artistic traditions, but this is not her primary concentration. Similarly—with the exception of *Lightning for Neda* (2009), a gargantuan six-panel mirror mosaic that memorializes Neda Agha-Soltan who was killed during the 2009 election protests in Iran—Farmanfarmaian’s work is not an overt commentary on the current regime. Rather, all who confront her mirrors are abstracted, made diffuse, unrecognizable and, in a way, equal. The spectator becomes subsumed within, consumed by,

and multiplied, inside and outside the piece as each mosaic endlessly metamorphoses with the changing light. In this reflected and reflective space, there are neither veils nor nudity, and no elements of power or authority, religious or otherwise. In their constant fluidity, the mirror works reside solely in the present. The reflective glass fragments fracture and explode the viewer in mystifying, unpredictable, and thus challenging ways. As the late Iranian filmmaker and photographer Abbas Kiarostami commented, “We have become indifferent to introspection and thoughts about the world around us. Standing before Monir’s mirrors, unable to see our own image, we are forced to take an inner journey.”

Farmanfarmaian still feels the compulsion to create. She often repeats that she remains “on a constant quest for the new.” Now, after enduring the relocation or destruction of many of her monumental works, she has received an honor at home that supersedes those from galleries and museums elsewhere. In December 2017, she presided over the opening of a museum in Tehran dedicated to her work. With more than 50 pieces from her private collection, the Monir Museum, housed in a 19th-century palace, is a landmark event, both for Farmanfarmaian and Iranian political and cultural history. As she points out, with quiet pride and likely a small hidden smile, “It is the first museum in the country dedicated to a woman artist.”

Mirrorwork and reverse glass painting is the hallmark of Monir’s practice. The three works pictured (left to right: *Nonagon*, *Triangle*, *Pentagon*) were created in 2013, when the artist was in her late 80s.



The Monir Museum opened in December 2017 in Tehran, at the city’s Negarestan Garden. It displays 51 of Farmanfarmaian’s works.