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Why the Empress of Iran's lost \$4 billion modern art collection is coming to light

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Visitors at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art view a rarely seen Picasso from a collection amassed by deposed empress Farah Pahlavi. **Kaveh Kazemi**

by Miriam Cosic

In 1974, the Shah of Iran and his impossibly glamorous wife, the Empress Farah Pahlavi, flew into Canberra to begin a state visit. They were greeted by governor-general Sir John Kerr and his daughter, prime minister Gough Whitlam and his wife, all bows and curtsies, and a 21-gun salute. It was the start of a wildly successful tour, with the Shah inspecting his mining interests while Australians inspected everything worn and done by the woman the press had dubbed "the Jacqueline Kennedy of the Middle East".

A report in *The Australian Women's Weekly* at the time began: "Everyone wanted to see Empress Farah wherever she went on her eight-day visit ... One of the most elegant and beautiful women in the world, with a quiet charm and warm brown eyes ..." Quite apart from her day-to-day polish, her YSL wedding dress and coronation crown made to design by Van Cleef & Arpels were hard to forget.

Just one year earlier, the empress had been trying to buy Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* at the same time as the Australian National Gallery in Canberra. The negotiations were delicate and secret. Canberra won and Australians fumed, both at the painting's

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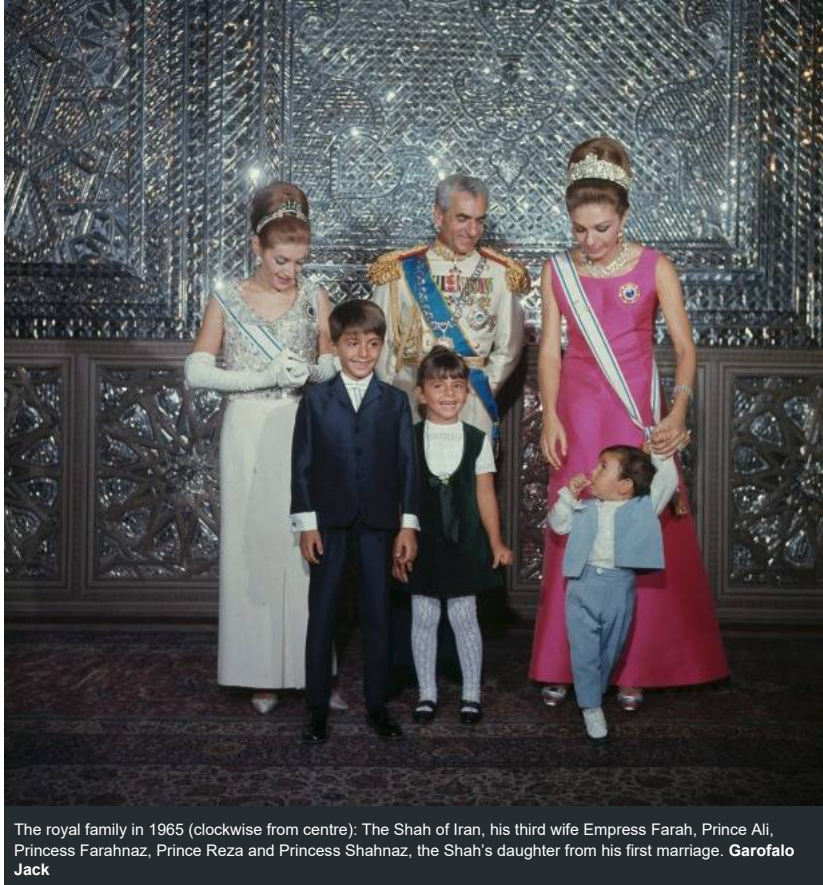
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abstraction and the \$1.3 million cost. Pahlavi went on to acquire Pollock's 1950 masterwork, *Mural on Indian Red Ground*. Along with works by Picasso, Gauguin, Giacometti, Warhol, Bacon, Rothko and other luminaries, it formed the backbone of a collection of modernist and contemporary works deemed to be the largest outside Europe and North America.

During the late 1970s, when the Shah was facing rising domestic opposition to his authoritarian rule, his wife was championing cultural awareness. On October 13, 1977, her grand project, the [Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art](#), opened with great fanfare. The museum became an international symbol of her work, a cultural complement to the Shah's moves towards modernisation, his "White Revolution". She promoted women's rights, established literacy programs and mobile libraries, and launched a film festival. She gave blood and encouraged Iranians to do the same. She established the first self-sustaining leper colony in Iran and visited its residents.



The royal family in 1965 (clockwise from centre): The Shah of Iran, his third wife Empress Farah, Prince Ali, Princess Farahnaz, Prince Reza and Princess Shahnaz, the Shah's daughter from his first marriage. **Garofalo Jack**

Within two brief years, all that was finished. [The 1979 revolution sent the Shah and the Shahbanu into exile](#). World leaders, such as Jimmy Carter in the US, who had extolled the greatness of [Iran's leader](#), refused them refuge. The revolutionary collaboration between Marxist students, imams and others opposed to the Shah's wealth and extravagance, his adoption of Western ways and the operation of his terrifying and ubiquitous secret service, the SAVAK, soon devolved into religious rule under the Ayatollah Khomeini, who railed against "Westoxification". The Ayatollah banned Western books, music and films, and forced women – who had been granted the vote under the Shah in 1963 – back into hijab.

The empress' art collection was transferred to the basement of the newly built museum. It has not been seen again except in rare circumstances: the last time was in 2005 when some works not deemed offensive to Iran's religious sensibilities – including the Pollock – were displayed. A loan of 60 works to Berlin's Gemäldegalerie last year was inexplicably blocked by the Iranian authorities at the eleventh hour. Today the collection is estimated to be worth \$US3 billion (\$3.9 billion).

Book and film tell the story



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The story of Farah Pahlavi's lifelong love affair with the arts, the museum she founded and its hidden art collection is the subject of a forthcoming book by Australian author Miranda Darling and London-based art adviser Viola Raikhel-Bolot. The pair have also established a company, to make a documentary celebrating the life of Pahlavi, the first in a planned series about women influential in art history. They are already filming in Britain and are negotiating with Iran.

"Vanishing Pictures was created to tell the stories of the monarchs, moguls, muses and mistresses throughout history that have shaped the art world," Raikhel-Bolot says over coffee and chocolates at a fashionable Sydney hotel. "These powerful, independent, magnetic women have led extraordinary lives. However, their stories are often ignored, forgotten or marginalised because of politics or gender."



A rare outing of Jackson Pollock's 'Mural On Indian Red Ground'. Kaveh Kazemi

The Shah died of cancer soon after the revolution: it was his eventual admission into America in 1979 to receive treatment that was one of the triggers for the American embassy hostage drama that soured relations between Iran and the US. Pahlavi continues, ever fashionable, ever in demand in the highest echelons of cosmopolitan society and ever busy with her projects, living between Paris and Potomac, Maryland, in the US. She is a tireless supporter of young Iranian artists in exile.

Through her art world contacts, Raikhel-Bolot secured Pahlavi's collaboration with their project. "She speaks in this beautiful gravelly voice with a lovely accent," Darling says. "Things like that are very atmospheric so she's wonderful to have on film. She's very elegant and engaged, and tells a great story." Pahlavi helped the authors with research for their 200-page book, which features more than 100 illustrations and will be published by Assouline in September. Unusually, the text and even the title are being held tightly under wraps. The documentary is provisionally called Tehran's Hidden Vault of Modern Masterpieces.

Author interest in Iran and art

The two authors have their own links to the region. Raikhel-Bolot – Azerbaijan-born, LA-raised and now London-based – is a prominent corporate art adviser. She and her company, 1858 Ltd Art Advisory, constantly pop up on lists of 'who's in the know', from high-end investment advisers to fashion mavens. Darling – journalist, novelist and a scion of the prominent Australian business family – also moved around the world constantly as a child, hostage to her father's work as a management consultant. Educated at Oxford University, Darling now moves between Britain, Zurich and her Bondi home base.



Miranda Darling, Farah Pahlavi and Viola Raikhel-Bolot in Paris in front of an artwork by Iranian Aneh Mohammad Tafari. Getty

Both women are multilingual, highly educated, very fashionable and possess a sophisticated world view. Darling has a master's degree in strategic studies and has worked for the Centre for Independent Studies. She writes espionage thrillers, among other things.

When the subject of the ill-fated Iranian prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, comes up, as it surely does in connection with that country's turbulent history (the CIA has just released documents showing its involvement in the 1953 coup that deposed him), Darling says airily: "My grandfather [a geologist] was there, finding oil for the Shah. My mother grew up there, she remembers it."

Raikhel-Bolot and Darling are steering clear of politics in their project, but not with the aim of airbrushing history. "We know it. People know it. It's an unavoidable backdrop," says Raikhel-Bolot, of the repression under the Shah which fuelled the 1979 revolution. "And you don't have to say, 'Look at what it's like now.' When you see a picture of a veiled woman in front of a Rothko, it's striking." Darling adds: "We chose to not engage with that. A lot of people might not have talked to us, whereas they are happy to talk about art and culture. So, in a way, it's just as well."

Pahlavi's art collection is still in the basement of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, which shows only "appropriate" works. It's ironic that one of the paintings brought up briefly for public display 12 years ago was the Jackson Pollock. The abstract expressionism of Blue Poles may have provoked debate about the nature of art in 1970s Australia but in contemporary Tehran, it is figurative artwork that is problematic because Muslim religious art avoids depiction of living beings. As Darling point out: "Had she bought Renoir, that would have been more controversial than the Pollock."



The apartment in Tehran's Niavaran Palace from where the Shah and the empress fled in 1979 during the Iranian Revolution. Alex Bowie



Mixing with the Kennedys in 1962. **Getty**



The Shah of Iran and Empress Farah wave from their carriage as they ride through the streets of Tehran after their coronation ceremony in 1967. **Bettmann**