



MOHASSESS, ARDESHIR

MOHASSESS, ARDESHIR (Ardešir Moḥaṣṣešš, b. Rasht, 18 Šahrivar 1317Š./9 September 1938; d. New York, 18 Mehr 1387 Š./9 October 2008) eminent cartoonist, illustrator, graphic satirist, and painter, who played a major role in the development of satirical cartoon in Iran ([Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#)).

The youngest of four children, Ardešir was born to ‘Abbās-Qoli and Sorur Mahkāma Moḥaṣṣešš. His father was a judge and died when Ardešir was an infant. His mother, an educator and the principal of the first school for girls in Rasht, was a poet and literary figure in her own right, and a close acquaintance of the noted contemporary Persian poet, Parvin E‘tešāmi. Her endless supply of funny stories helped to enrich Ardešir’s imagination.

Ardešir’s childhood coincided with the military occupation of Iran (1941-46) by the Allied Forces during World War II. He was only three years old, when after watching a film series called “Enemies of the Nazis,” he was asked to say something about the film. Instead of talking, however, he drew the scene he liked (Firuz Bahrām in Tehran).

In 1951, while still at Firuz Bahrām, he was encouraged by a classmate to submit his work to *Towfiq*, the leading satirical journal of the period with high circulation, which along with *Bābā Šamal* and *Čelengar*, a leftist weekly founded in 1949 by Moḥammad ‘Ali Afrāšta, played instrumental roles in the flourishing of politically laden comic illustration in Iran. Most noted among the cartoonists who cooperated with the journals and achieved international acclaim were Ardešir Mohassess and Kāmbiz Derambaḳš (Momayyez, pp.



189-93). The cooperation of Mohassess with Towfiq lasted eight years. During these years he followed Towfiq's style of illustration, creating pictorial commentaries on Iranian daily life and satiric editorials on political figures. Exaggeration of face and body was the essence of the magazine's visual style.

Mohassess never studied art formally. Although ranked first among all applicants to the [Faculty of Fine Arts](#), he nevertheless opted to study political science. He graduated from Tehran University's [Faculty of Law and Political Science](#) in 1962 and was hired that same year as a librarian in the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. He quit the position after a year and devoted his time to his artistic career.

In 1963 Ahmad Shamlu (Aḥmad Šāmlu; 1925-1999), the noted modernist poet and the editor of the weekly magazine *Ketāb-e haftā* (Book of the week), published an issue featuring a series of works by Ardeshir, named *Šir-dokhtarān* (Brave daughters). The publication of his drawings at *Kayhān*, a newspaper with mass daily circulation, introduced his unique visual language to a much larger audience and established his fame as a satirist with a unique personal style (Dabashi, p. 19).

His first solo exhibition was held at Qandriz Gallery (see [Qandriz, Mansur](#)) in 1967. The pieces shown in this exhibition were all created in the preceding five years and were mostly published in daily and weekly journals. The exhibition attracted a large audience and earned him the praise of [Karim Emami](#) as "Iran's most eminent caricaturist" (Emami, 1967, p. 9).

A collection of Ardeshir's work from 1961 to 1966, entitled *Cactus*, was published in 1971 as a special issue of *Daftarhā-ye zamāna*, a periodical review of literature and art edited by Cyrus Ṭāhbāz, with an introduction by Karim Emami (LITHOGRAPHY i), Ardeshir produced an extraordinary volume of work portraying current events and everyday life of people. He often combined lithographic illustrations of *Šāh-nāma*, as well as religious lore and literary books, such as [Rezāqoli Khan Hedāyat](#)'s *Riāz al-ārefin and Bidel Kermāšāhi's Toḥfat-al dākerin* (Marzolph, p. 142), and the lithographed text of *Ketāb-e Āq-e wāledayn* (see [Āq-e wāledayn](#)), among many others, and complemented them by his unique sense of humor. His illustrations, arguably the best in the style (Marzolph, p. 141), were often created for editorial pages of newspapers and periodicals. Influenced by multiple sources they were minutely detailed, heavily hatched and crosshatched ('Obayd Zākāni's most famous mock-epic, *Manzuma-ye muš o gorba*. It narrates the cruel deeds and



hypocrisy of a tyrant personified by a cat, which torments a community of gullible mice. The illustrations were published in *Of Cats and Rats* (Toronto, 2004), with the English translation of the poem by Esmā'il Kō'i, the noted Persian poet who lives in exile in London (Sadeq Hedayat and Mas'ud Farzād (Paris, 2002), which was published by Ketāb Češmandāz, founded by Nāšer Pākdāman (Abadan and the massacre that took place in Shiraz. The drawings, as noted by Mohassess, picture the Iranian culture and sociopolitical life through the eye of an artist-reporter (see Khoi, 2008). The individual pieces, however, are stylistically different from each other: some are heavily stroked, some are minimal in their treatment, and some are curvilinear drawings reminiscent of drawings by the famous 16th-century Persian miniature artist Rezā 'Abbāsi (1565-1635).

As his work became stylistically more fluid—the result of a combination of factors including his illness and a widening circle of influences—Ardešhir experimented with color, collage, and abstract elements. Yet his primal urge to satirize and critique always remained at the heart of his practice. A collection of free sketches he did on streets and in coffee shops during the 1980s, some in colors, was published by Mage Publishers (Washington D.C., 1989), as *Ardešhir Mohassess: Closed Circuit History*, with introductions by Ramsey Clark, the 66th Attorney General of the United States (1967-69), and Ali Banuazizi (Figure 17). He managed to maintain the urgency and vitality of his drawings.

Ardešhir's oil paintings are the most color-saturated of his works. A solo exhibition of his expressive and colorful portraits (Figure 18, Figure 19), often laden with an expressionistic touch, titled as *Open Secret*, was held by Westbeth Gallery in New York in 1993. Mention should also be made of a special issue of *The Persian Book Review (Barresi-e ketāb)*, a literary and cultural periodical founded and published in Los Angeles by Majid Rošangar, in which a collection of Ardešhir's drawings were published (*The Persian Book Review* 4/15, Fall 1993). The issue also includes several images of Ardešhir's drawings for *New York Times*, *Quest*, and *Playboy*.

In 1997 Ardešhir underwent open-heart surgery in New York Hospital. His convalescence was followed by an accident while experimenting with painting portraits and landscapes in oil on canvas. It resulted in a deep burn to his right hand.

Throughout his career, Ardešhir had many solo and group exhibitions, starting with his participation in a group exhibition in the First Biennial Art Exhibition



in Tehran (1958) and culminating in a major solo exhibition of his works at the Asia Society Museum in New York in May 2008, entitled *Life and Satire in Iran*. The show, co-organized by the internationally acclaimed Iranian artist Shirin Neshat and Nicky Nodjoumi, was centered on the Library of Congress collection *Life in Iran* and received wide coverage. The exhibition, in which, as held by a critic, “references to Daumier and the Qajar dynasty were equally at home” (Rosenberg, p. E 28), reflected the broad visual and historical literacy of Mohassess’s satire and earned rave reviews in such journals as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as *The New Yorker* magazine. “In its exquisite draftsmanship, macabre and beautiful, one detects Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, even Aubrey Beardsley” (Kaylan, p. D 7). His latest works became more simple and direct (Figure 20, Figure 21).

Ardeshir Mohassess’s career spanned over half a century, a century with decisive turns in Iran’s socio-political environment. Despite his illness and its resultant physical limitations he worked tirelessly. He was a sensitive, humble, and mild-mannered artist with a philosophic sense of humor that remained intact to the end. He seemed, as held by a critic and friend “so consumed by his work and oblivious to all that took place around him that one wondered how he could possibly manage the day-to-day chores of his life alone” (Banuazizi, 1984, p. 279). He did not marry and had no children. He died from a massive heart attack on 9 October 2008 at his home in New York City, and was buried in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn (Martin).

To commemorate his life and legacy on the occasion of the second anniversary of his death, a two-day conference, entitled “Ardeshir Mohassess, Art, Politics, and Beyond,” was held at New York University from October 9 to October 10, 2010 (Figure 22). Several scholars and art critics participated in the conference and a selection of his drawings was displayed to high applause. The conference and the exhibition were organized by “Friends of Ardeshir” and sponsored by the Iranian Studies Initiative of New York University.

“Ardeshir Mohassess and his Caricatures” is a black-and-white documentary produced by the film critic and independent producer Bahman Maghsoudlou. The film was originally made in 1972 and has recently been revised as “Ardeshir: The Rebellious Artist” (2012). The fact that Ardeshir is silent throughout the film accentuates the artist’s eccentric persona. Interviews with critics and friends are arranged to show the nuances of his life and his progressive sociopolitical outlook. Samples of Ardeshir’s cartoons, illustrations, and works for the *New York Times* along with his avant-garde



style are covered in the film (Maghsoudlou).

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1967 Qandriz Gallery, Tehran

1969 Sayhoun Gallery, Tehran

1971 Municipal Club, Tehran

1971 Sayhoun Gallery, Tehran

1972 Iran-America Society Cultural Center, Tehran

1974 Columbia University, New York

1975 Graham Gallery, New York

1975 Litho Gallery, Tehran

1976 Zand Gallery, Tehran

1978 Zand Gallery, Tehran

1983 Studio 369, Boston

1986 Persian Arts Foundation, Los Angeles

1993 Westbeth Gallery, 'Open Secret', New York

2008 Asia Society Museum, Ardeshir Mohasses: Art and Satire in Iran, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITION

1958 First Biennial Art Exhibit, Tehran

1960 Second Biennial Art Exhibit, Tehran

1962 Third Biennial Art Exhibit, Tehran

1964 Fourth Biennial Art Exhibit, Tehran

1971 Musee des Arts, Paris



1973 Drawings from *The New York Times*, Musee des Beaux Arts, Bordeaux

1974 Drawings from *The New York Times*, Louvre Museum, Paris

1976 Modern Iranian Arts, Iran-America Society, Tehran

1976 The International Arts Fair, Basel

1977 Hayden Zand Gallery, Washington, D.C

1980 Politics and Arts: Ten Years of Graphic Commentary, 1970-1980, The American Institute of Graphic Arts, New York

PUBLISHED COLLECTIONS

Cactus, a special issue of *Daftarhā-ye zamāna* on Ardešir

Moḥaṣṣeṣṣ, ed. Cyrus Ṭāhbāz, introduction by Karim Emāmi, Tehran, 1971.

Bā Ardešir o 'arusakhāyaš (With Ardešir and his puppets), introduction by 'Ali-Aṣḡar Ḥāj Sayyed-Javādi, Tehran, 1971.

Instances, ed. Kambiz Farrokhi, Haarlem, Netherlands, 1972.

Vaqāye'-ye ettefāqiya (Current events), introd. Aḥmad Sāmlu, Tehran, 1973.

Šenās-nāma (Identity card), Tehran, 1973.

Tašrifāt (Ceremonies), introd. Āydin Āḡdāšlu, Tehran, 1973.

Ardešir o havā-ye ṭufāni (Ardešir and stormy winds), introd. 'Ali-Aṣḡar Ḥāj Sayyed-Javādi, Tehran, 1973.

Kāfar-nāma (*Hedonist's notebook*), Tehran, 1975.

Tabrikāt (*Congratulations*), Tehran, 1976.

Puppets, introd. Wendy Coyle, San Francisco, 1977.

Closed Circuit History, foreword by Ramsey Clark, introd. Ali Banuazizi, Washington D.C., 1989.

Life in Iran, Washington D.C., 1994.

Ardešir Mohasses: Art and Satire in Iran, ed. Shirin Neshat and Nicky



Nodjoumi, New York, 2008.

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Ali Banauazizi, "Ardešir Mohasses and His Images Of Revolution," *Iranian Studies* 17/ 2-3, Spring-Summer 1984, pp. 279-83.

Idem, "Introduction," in *Closed Circuit History*, Washington D.C., 1989, pp. 17-21.

Ramsey Clark, "Foreword," in *Closed Circuit History*, Washington D.C., 1989, pp. 7-16.

Hamid Dabashi, "Ardešir Mohasses, Etcetera," in *Ardešir Mohasses: Art and Satire in Iran*, ed. Shirin Neshat and Nicky Nodjoumi, New York, 2008, pp. 19-30.

Karim Emami, "ART IN IRAN xi. POST-QAJAR," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* II, 1971a, pp. 640-46.

Idem, "Kārikāture be tizi-e tiḡ," *Ketāb-e nemuna 55: gozida-i az ān če dar bāra-ye Ardešir nevešta-and*, Tehran, 1967, pp. 9-11.

Idem, "Introduction," in *Cāctus*, a special issue of *Daftarhā-ye zamāna* on Ardešir Moḥaššešš, ed. Cyrus Ṭāhbāz, Emāmi, Tehran, 1971b.

‘Ali Ašḡar Ḥāj Sayyed Javādi, "Introduction," in *Ardešir o ‘arusakhāyaš*, Tehran, 1971.

Steve Heller, "Ardešir Mohassess: From Dream to Nightmare," *Graphis* 38/220, July-August 1982, pp. 82-87.

Jeune Afrique, "Arts Jeune Afrique: A Selectioné," no. 576, 1972, pp. 52-53.



Jeune Afrique “Ni Bête, Ni Méchant,” no. 626, 1973, pp. 46-47.

Melik Kaylan, in *Wall Street Journal*, Thursday, 19 June 2008, p. D 7.

Esmail Khoi, “A Conversation with Ardeshir Mohasses,” in *Ardeshir Mohasses: Art and Satire in Iran*, ed. Shirin Neshat and Nicky Nodjoumi, New York, 2008, pp. 31-38.

Esmā‘il Kō‘i, *Šenākt-nāma-ye Ardešir Moḥasseš*, Tehran, 1973.

Bahman Maghsoudlou, “Ardeshir Mohasses & His Caricatures,” IFVC International Film & Video Center, <http://www.ifvc.com/ardeshir-mohasses.htm>.

Douglas Martin, “Ardeshir Mohasses, Iranian Cartoonist dies at 70,” *The New York Times*, Monday, 20 October 2008, p. A 29.

Ulrich Marzolph, “Taṣāvir-e čāp sangi-e ‘ahd-e Qājār: Manba‘-e elhām-e honar-e mo‘ṣer-e Irān,” *Herfa: Naqqāš*, no. 13, Pā‘iz 1374 Š./ Autumn 2005, pp. 138-45.

Morteżā Momayyez, “[GRAPHIC ARTS: IN THE QAJAR AND PAHLAVI PERIOD](#),” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* XI, 2003, pp. 189-93.

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Karen Rosenberg, “Life in Iran, Etched with Suspicion and Humor,”

The New York Times, Art Section, Friday 30 May 2008, p. E 28.