



MOMAYYEZ, MORTEŽĀ

MOMAYYEZ, Morteżā (b. Tehran, August 1936; d. Tehran, November 2005), illustrator, painter, teacher and writer who played a pivotal role in the development of graphic design in contemporary Iran ([FIGURE 1](#); see [GRAPHIC ARTS](#)).

Mommayez was the eldest son of Moḥammad-‘Ali and Kānom Kučak. His paternal grand uncle, Musā, was a noted painter of the late Qajar era (1794-1925). Momayyez worked in a variety of professions from an early age to draw a living, starting out as a storefront sign writer while still in high school. He was admitted to Tehran University’s Faculty of Fine Arts in 1956, and began working at Moḥammad Bahrāmi’s Graphic Design Studio for three years. In 1960 he was appointed art director of *Irān-e Ābād* magazine. He also worked for a while at Zibā Advertising Agency. In 1961 he was employed at Keyhān Printing and Publishing Corporation, where Aḥmad Šāmlu (1925-2000), renowned poet and the then editor-in-chief of *Ketāb-e haftā*, a new publication from Keyhān, invited Momayyez to be its illustrator. Years later in an interview with Firuza Šāberi, he remembered these years as his introduction to graphic design: “I put many things to the test and learnt many things.” (Šāberi, p. 14) After graduation from the Faculty of Fine Arts in 1965, Momayyez gave up painting altogether and focused on graphic design; an art form which attracted interest in Iran with the expansion of lithography and modern typography in the second half of the Qajar period (see [ČĀP](#)). Although visible in graphic motifs and patterns on ancient clay and metal vessels, seals, brickwork, glazed tiles, carpets, miniature paintings, calligraphy, manuscript



illuminations, etc. (see [CALLIGRAPHY](#); [CARPETS](#)), it was considered by many in Momayyez's time, including his peers at the Faculty, merely commercial, or rather, a betrayal of artistic aspirations, and a deviation from the artistic course (Şāberi, p.12).

Momayyez traveled to France in the same year to continue his education in interior design at École Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs. In Paris he met his future wife, Firuza Şāberi (Momayyez, 2003, pp. 31-41). Upon his return to Iran in 1968, he founded the Department of Graphic Design in the Faculty of Fine Arts. While teaching in the Department, he created posters for cultural events and designed book covers, emblems and logos. He also cooperated as art director and graphic designer with many prestigious literary and artistic journals, including *Farhang o zendegi* ([Culture and Life](#), 1969-1978), a periodical published in Tehran by the Secretariat of the High Council of Culture and Art (Dabir-kāna-ye šawrā-ye 'āli-e farhang o honar). He made three short animation films, one of which, "Yek noqṭa-ye sabz" (A Green Point, 1972), won the honorary diploma of the Moscow film festival in 1973 (*Newsletter*, 18/1, p. 10). He was the set and costume designer for several films and theater productions, including "Ṭabī'at-e bi-jān (Still Nature, 1976), directed by Sohrāb Šahid-Ṭālet̄, and a few of [Ġolām-Ḥosayn Sā'edi's](#) plays, including *Dikta va zāvia* (Dictation and chapbook), which was staged by Dāvud Rašidi in 1969. He also worked as art director and designer for the Tehran Film Festival from 1973 to 1977.

Momayyez rose to prominence for his magazine layouts, typography, and film posters, among others ([FIGURE 2](#) and [FIGURE 3](#)). He was particularly recognized for designing new signs. He had an eye for identifying non-essential lines and points and could sense minor differences, distinctions and details. In his challenge to refine a concept, he simplified a shape to the point beyond which it lost proportion and the concept was rendered meaningless. (Met̄ qāli, introduction to *Mortežā Momayyez: tarrāḥi-e gerāfik, 'akkāsi, naḡḡāši*). Simplification of forms and their conversion into expressive lines and rough textured planes were the hallmarks of Momayyez's paintings. His illustrations are also marked by variations of these distinctive attributes. He put aside the brush, the oil paint and the canvas for a steel drawing pen, a cutter, ink and paper to explore new horizons. Often he covered glossy cardboards with ink and then proceeded to scrape out images from within the black background, creating images reminiscent of woodcuts.

His twenty-two illustrations of Qur'ānic Stories (1962), to which he tried, in his

own words, to give his all (Şāberi, p. 16), are amongst his finest and the most noted works in this technique (FIGURE 4). In *Dāstānhā-ye Šāh-nāma* (Stories from the *Shahnameh*) a selection of the *Šāh-nāma* stories by Ehsan Yarshater (Tehran, 1959), Momayyez's black and white illustrations introduced a good measure of realism in the illustrations. The portraiture of the *Shahnameh* figures, the scenes of battles and single combats, etc. are animated, well drawn and original. They show Momayyez at his best as a draftsman.

One of his most outstanding creations, that shows Momayyez at his creative best both in terms of conception and execution, is the illustrations that he provided for the *Bargozida-ye Dāstānhā-ye Šāh-nāma* (Selected stories from the *Shahnameh*), rendered in prose by Ehsan Yarshater (Tehran, 1974, FIGURE 5). The traditional illustrations of the *Šāh-nāma* episodes and the depiction of Iranian kings, queens and heroes that appeared in history books, chap books, batik (*qalamkār*) curtains, carpets, etc. go back ultimately to Sasanian illustrations, which were inherited by Islamic illustrators. He has completely set aside the traditional rendering of *Šāh-nāma* figures as well as any attempt to render the figures and scenes realistically. Instead, he has given shape, often with a minimalistic and expressionistic approach and by the use of colors, to his imagined likeness of the *Šāh-nāma* figures based on their characters and traits as depicted by Ferdowsi. His rendering of the revolt of Kāva, the three sons of Fereyduṅ and the king of Yemen, the battle of Široy and Garshāsp, the meeting of Zāl and Rudāba, the young Rostam killing an elephant, the selection of Raḡš, the portraits of Kay Qobād and Kay Kāvus, the scene of Rostam overwhelming Afrāsiāb, etc. are feats of a very strong, confident and original imagination. (This book was translated into English by Dick Davis and published by Mage Publishers as part of a trilogy, rendering the stories of the entire *Šāh-nāma* in a combination of prose and verse; but the illustrations by Momayyez were not used.)

Momayyez rarely used color in his illustrations. Faršid Metqāli (b.1940), noted graphic designer and illustrator, wrote in his introduction to a collection of Momayyez's works, entitled *Mortežā Momayyez: Ṭarrāḥi-e gerāfik, 'akkāsi, naqqāši 1957-2005* (Morteza Momayyez: Graphic Design, Photography, Painting: 1957- 2005, Tehran, 2005), that Momayyez started his artistic career when the print industry in Iran was still in its nascent stage, computerized scanning and designing were not yet accessible, and image making in black and white seemed to be the only viable option for illustrations (Metqāli, introduction; Behnud, p. 379). Momayyez experimented later with the



technique of photomontage; enlarging a photograph to its halftone image, then cutting it and manipulating it for the work at hand. Alain Le Quer nec, the Swiss graphic designer (b. 1944), contended that Momayyez was under the influence of Swiss design, distinguished for its perfectionism and rigor of typography, on the one hand, and yet fascinated by the simplicity, the directness of composition, the freshness of expressionism and, above all, the unbound freedom of creativity of the Polish school of graphic design, on the other (Le Quer nec, 2006, p. 17).

Some of his works drew on elements of Persian art such as carpet motifs and *Nasta'liq* script. He chose a 16th century Persian miniature for the poster he designed in 2005 for an exhibition organized by the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts, entitled “Masterpieces of Persian Painting” (FIGURE 6). The poster turned out to be his last. Although cast in traditional Persian painting style his work also exhibited appreciation for modernist trends in painting and design. In his elaboration on what he termed ‘the responsibility of the artist,’ in one of his articles in *Harfhā-ye tajroba* (Words of Experience, 2003), entitled “Darbāra-ye eṣālat-e naqqāši-e sonnati-e mā,” he pointed to the contemporary artist’s responsibility to translate the pictorial language of the past into the system of signification by which modern art is universally recognized (Momayyez, 2003, p. 171-72).

Momayyez was one of the founders of Tālār-e-Iran (1964), an art gallery that dedicated some of its exhibitions to illustrators and graphic designers from Iran and abroad. In 1974, along with six painters and sculptors, he founded the Āzād Group. The exhibitions held by the Group tended towards conceptual art, a novel trend in the artistic circles of the period. Momayyez exhibited twice in shows organized by the Group. His first installation (1976) showed knives planted in twenty-five pots, while in the second (1977), large kitchen knives were hung from the ceiling of a connecting corridor, forcing viewers to pass from underneath them. The title of the piece “Zendeḡi āzmāyeš ast na āsāyeš” (Life is a test, not a rest), was quoted from *Kvāja ‘Abd-Allāh Anṣāri*, the 11th century mystic scholar, noted for his oratory and poetic skills in Arabic and Persian. Although some viewers detected anti-establishment sentiments in the installations, the shows were not cancelled. In 2000, he was appointed a lifetime associate member of the Iranian Academy for the Arts.

Momayyez compiled articles and served as editor of *Honar-e gerāfik dar Irān* (Graphic Art in Iran, Tehran, 1974), and played an instrumental role in organizing an exhibition entitled “Fifty Years of Iranian Graphics” in 1976.

Works by two generations of Iranian illustrators, designers, cartoonists and calligraphers were displayed and presented in the exhibit's catalogue. He organized several graphic design exhibits in the ensuing years, notable among them was the "Iran Graphic Design Biennials" to which he was appointed as president in 1987.

While teaching at various universities, and holding official and unofficial responsibilities, Momayyez increasingly turned to writing after the Revolution of 1979. The didactic tone of his writings signified his desire to familiarize the young generation of Iranian designers, who had grown up in the politicized atmosphere of the late 1970's and 1980's, with contemporary Iran's accomplishments in graphic design. He lamented the inept and seemingly popularized graphic works that showed up in the emblems of political groups, in posters that were based on popular paintings to represent current events, and in postage stamps. He considered unfamiliarity with the fundamentals of graphic design and the absence of good taste among factors that might have contributed to the proliferation of such works (Momayyez, 2003, p. 206). In 1983 he published a collection of his signs and logos, along with explanatory notes, entitled *Nešānahā* (Signs).

Momayyez's works were published in several collections (see below). His articles and essays on visual arts and graphic design were published in national and international journals, including several of Iran's most prominent literary journals of the post-revolutionary period, including *Rudaki* (1971-1978), *Bukhara* (previously *Kelk*, 1980-2005), *Negāh-e nou* (1991 to 1999), and *Goftogu* (1994-2005). He contributed the entries on the "FACULTY OF FINE ARTS" (vol. IX, pp. 142-3), "GRAPHIC ARTS i. IN THE QAJAR AND PAHLAVI PERIOD" (vol. IX, pp. 189-93), to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, as well as "DOORS AND DOOR FRAMES," which he has co-authored with Sheila Blair.

Illness and the loss of his wife of thirty years did not prevent Momayyez from working. His dream of creating a professional organization for graphic designers eventually led to the establishment of the Iranian Graphic Designers Society, which he founded with the help of his colleagues in 1997. Under his tutelage the Society became an active non-governmental organization (NGO) in the arts and provided assistance to many designers, particularly those at the beginning of their artistic careers. The 5,000 and 10,000 *Rial* banknotes, in use in Iran for several years after the 1979 Revolution, were designed by Momayyez (*Newsletter*, 18/1, p. 10).



Momayyez's fame traveled outside Iran's borders. From 1968 onwards, his works were repeatedly published in such distinguished magazines as *Novum*, a monthly journal of graphic design (Germany); *Modern Publicity* (London); *Projekt* (Poland); *Graphic Design* (Japan); *Letterhead Annuals* (USA); and *Graphics: The International Journal of Visual Communication*, which was first published in 1944 by Walter Herdeg (1908-1995) in Zurich, and later emerged as a reference tool for graphic designers from all over the world. In 1977, at the suggestion of several prominent graphic designers and artists, including Milton Glaser (b. 1929), American graphic designer and founder of *New York Magazine*, and Roman Cieslewicz (1930-1996), Polish designer and graphic artist, Momayyez was made a member of the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI), a club of the world's leading graphic artists and designers. He was in contact with many internationally acclaimed designers, such as the Polish poster designer Jan Lenica (1928-2001), Japanese sculptor and graphic artist Shigeo Fukuda (b. 1932), and German lithographer and graphic artist Holger Matthies (b. 1940), and exhibited their works in Iran. Momayyez was amongst the one hundred poster designers whose works were displayed at an exhibit, entitled "A Tribute to Toulouse Lautrec," at Centre George Pompidou in Paris (2001, [FIGURE 7](#)). He took part in many international exhibits in Europe, United States of America and Asia, the last one of which was "Graphic Designers of Three Continents," held at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts in 2004. Honors conferred upon him by the international community include the Desinnateur Poète Award at the Internationale d'Affiche de Film (Cannes, 1975); the "Best Work" award at the International Logo & Trademarks of the 1980's Exhibit (1990); and the Icoграда Achievement Award for life-long professional achievement (2003). His work was included in a collection of works for the Brussels International Trademark Center in 1991. (For a comprehensive list of Momayyez's exhibitions, books, articles, and awards see *Nešān*, no. 10, September 2006, and, *Harfhā-ye tajroba*, Mortežā Momayyez, Tehran, 2003).

To commemorate his 70th birthday, shortly after his death, *Nešān*, a graphic design quarterly first published in 2003 under Momayyez's supervision, printed posters by forty one designers from all over the world, including works by such artists as Seymour Chwast (b. 1931), American designer and founder of *The Push Pin Graphic*, Alan Gerard Fletcher (1931-2006), prolific British graphic designer, Massimo Vignelli (b. 1931), Italian public signage designer, as well as Shigeo Fukuda, and Milton Glaser, among others.

Momayyez died on November 25, 2005, having battled prostate cancer for ten years, and was buried in Dehkordān Cemetery, in a village near Karaj. Many of his friends, students and admirers participated in his memorial ceremony. He was remembered as an artist who played a major role in the development of graphic design in Iran (Warner, p. 17; Āgdāšlu, 2005, p. 422-3), and one whose “too early death is a severe blow to the international design community.” (Bos, p. 17) His obituary published in the Center for Iranian Studies’ *Newsletter*, portrayed Momayyez as an artist who “played a leading role in the establishment and development of graphic arts, and in the training of top artists and designers in Iran.” (*Newsletter*, p. 10) His deathbed wish to be remembered has been honored by the establishment of a foundation dedicated to the preservation and propagation of his work, overseen by his second wife, Afsāna, and a number of former colleagues.

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(EIr)

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