

# The Boston Globe

Shows at Yale and Harvard look at artistic exile and mingling



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**Abu al-Hasan Ghaffari Kashani Naqqash-Bashi's "Muhammad Ibrahim Khan Siham al-Mulk, Commander of the Isfahan Division."**

By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 15, 2017

There are really only two stories: A person goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town. The novelist John Gardner is said to have coined this notion.

"Artists in Exile: Expressions of Loss and Hope," at Yale University Art Gallery through Dec. 31, hinges on the first, exploring the grief, yearning, and renewal that accompanies leaving home. A show at the Harvard Art Museums contemplates the latter.

The art world has well and truly examined the exile of artists fleeing Europe for America before and during World War II. Several of them are

represented here: Hans Hofmann, Lotte Jacobi, Marcel Duchamp, and more. But what about other displaced artists? “Artists in Exile” spans two centuries, starting with Jacques-Louis David’s exile from France in 1816 after he supported regicide and Napoleon. Today, Middle Eastern artists flee war.

A gory, abstracted face, in which cubism and surrealism collide with horror, looms in Iraqi artist Ahmed Alsoudani’s untitled print. Syrian Mohamed Hafez’s architectural model of a bomb-blasted building rises from an open suitcase, the embodiment of haunted baggage a refugee might carry. Both now live in the United States.

Who belongs? What is home? Who is allowed where? These questions seem especially urgent in light of the current administration’s stance on immigration, and they imbue this exhibition with tenderness. But a golden vein runs through “Artists in Exile,” as well: Put an artist in a new environment, and good things might happen to the art.

David, a widely celebrated painter, left for Belgium at the age of 68. He buckled down on realism as if to prove he still had his stuff. His portraits here, such as one of François-Antoine Rasse de Gavre, the 16-year-old, peach-fuzzed son of a local noble, beam with pride and humanity.

More than a century on, Emil Nolde found solace in painting after the Nazis decried his work in their now-infamous Degenerate Art show in 1937 (despite his support of the regime). Forbidden from painting and in self-exile in northern Germany, he used watercolors, which didn’t have the giveaway stench of oils, and worked in a small room in his house using what paper he could find to make eerie, dear paintings with otherworldly colors and capering, affectionate figures.

Mid-20th-century America wasn’t the Promised Land for everyone. African-Americans Elizabeth Catlett and Beauford Delaney left. Catlett went to Mexico, and Delaney to Paris. Delaney was gay, and he found more acceptance in Paris for that, too.

Catlett left in 1946. In Mexico, she made a series of linocuts called “The Negro Woman,” small, bold, and noble portraits. Their titles speak in the first person. “My right is a future of equality with other Americans” rises in a vaulting diagonal composition of a woman gazing upward, aspiring.

Delaney moved to Paris in 1953. Captivated by French Impressionism, he began to play with chromatic abstraction. His frothy, delicate untitled painting, an all-over cloudscape of minty green, shadowy blue, and white, might have had a place in the American art world alongside Rothko and Frankenthaler, but that art world struggled to square Delaney’s race with his art.

Exiles face questions about identity, belonging, and justice. For artists, the canvas becomes a record of contending with those questions, even if the painting is simply a portrait of a local nobleman or a local landmark. Gustave Courbet repeatedly painted the Château de Chillon, a castle in Switzerland. The artist, a member of the Paris Commune, had exiled himself from France there, unable to pay fines the new republican government imposed for his involvement in the destruction of a column in Place Vendôme.

The castle had once been a prison. To Courbet, away from home, never to return, perhaps it signified one still.

In “Technologies of the Image: Art in 19th-Century Iran” at the Harvard Art Museums through Jan. 7, the stranger who comes to town — not so strange, really, but foreign and increasingly present with imperialist ambitions — is Europe.

Europeans brought photography and lithography to Iran. They also brought plenty of judgment. Julien de Rochechouart, a French diplomat writing in 1867, cited the Persians’ “lack of taste,” and paintings that “would make you grind your teeth.” Nineteenth-century Iranian art hasn’t gotten much due, and that’s partly because opinions like de Rochechouart’s stuck.

Iranian artists working for royals and those peddling their art synthesized the new technologies and looked to European art as a model. Their works mixed Western realism and perspective with Persian art’s tendency to flatten. Critics such as de Rochechouart favored older Persian art, which they saw as indigenous and pure.

Even traditional mediums reflected the changing aesthetic during the Qajar regime, which spanned the 1800s. The works in “Technologies of the Image” include paintings and lacquerware.

To 21st-century eyes, the paintings are nearly surreal in their blended styles. Abu al-Hasan Ghaffari Kashani Naqqash-Bashi’s mixed-media watercolor “Muhammad Ibrahim Khan Siham al-Mulk, Commander of the Isfahan Division,” depicts generals and their infantry. Their faces have photographic particularity, but their bodies, presented straight on with military stiffness, look like paper dolls.

The show is built around some wonderful central objects. An album of artists’ drawings that has been in Harvard’s collection for more than 50 years but only recently closely studied provides a window onto processes for art created on spec. The drawings are templates. A lacquer mirror case with scenes of a baby’s birth and circumcision features an attendant who appears in the album’s drawings of lovers on a terrace.

A coy European lass with her finger to her chin shows up in a drawing and on lacquer pen boxes; she was sourced from a work by French artist Bernard-Romain Julien. European women, sometimes nude, turned up as lust objects in Qajar art, just as Middle Eastern women appeared in European art.

Another treasure: Between 1862 and 1900, Ali Khan Vali, governor of the province of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran, recorded his life and times in photographs in a marvelous, giant album made of sailcloth. So big that it takes two to heft, it’s packed with portraits and chatty documentary.

Photography and lithography enabled imagery to circulate. We see that in a chromolithograph of a Persian family that vibrates with textile patterns. That was a later iteration of a staged photo taken in the late 19th century; someone put that image on a postcard, and in 1906 it appeared in the New-York Tribune.

The dispersal and repetition of images was nothing new to Persians, for whom, like the Chinese, copying great art was (and is) a way of perpetuating an aesthetic legacy. That, too, flummoxed some Europeans, who put a premium on originality.

If 19th-century Europeans turned up their noses at Persian art, they missed seeing a vital cultural economy eagerly integrating new methods to make art that would please, and art that would sell. That's what happens: A stranger comes to town, and he becomes your neighbor.

**ARTISTS IN EXILE: EXPRESSIONS OF LOSS AND HOPE**

At Yale University Art Gallery, 1111 Chapel St., New Haven, through Dec. 31. 203-432-0600, [artgallery.yale.edu/](http://artgallery.yale.edu/)

**TECHNOLOGIES OF THE IMAGE: ART IN 19TH-CENTURY IRAN**

At Harvard Art Museums, 32 Quincy St., Cambridge, through Jan. 7. 617-495-9400, [www.harvardartmuseums.org](http://www.harvardartmuseums.org)