

Parviz Tanavoli: Sculpted Poetry

The recent retrospective exhibition of one of Iran's most famous sculptors has helped to broaden the scope of contemporary Iranian art for art historians around the world. In exploring the work of Parviz Tanavoli, I hope to illuminate his sculptural intersections of Persian tradition with contemporary form.

By Nina Cichocki

On 26 January 2003, the contemporary Iranian art world was enriched by a long-awaited event in the Tehran Museum of Modern Art: the opening of a retrospective exhibition of Parviz Tanavoli, modern Iran's leading sculptor. Although a world-class sculptor in the 1960s and 1970s, Tanavoli has remained lesser known to Western audiences and even art historians. There are a number of factors that account for his undeserved obscurity: scholars of modern art still concentrate mainly on developments within their own European or American cultural horizons and are seldom familiar with the ideas underlying Tanavoli's oeuvre, which is rooted in the cultural heritage of Islamic Persia. Scholars of Islamic art, on the other side, focus on the past rather than the present. Here, I will discuss the relationship of Tanavoli's oeuvre to Persian classical poetry, using as examples one early work as well as his most famous sculpture.

Poet with the symbol of freedom, 1962

Although many of Tanavoli's bronzes depict humans, as we can gather from both their statuary forms and their titles, he obliterates distinct facial features, poses, or hand gestures, all of which carry the expression of sentiment. *The Poet with the Symbol of Freedom* sports a box-like shape with a perforated front where we would imagine the head to be. The perforated front, reminiscent of the grilles on the shrines Tanavoli has visited since his childhood, acts like a veil: it hides the poet's face, bans all details and specifics, and, therefore, renders the poet's feelings abstract and generalized. The cylindrical body is devoid of arms and hands or any bod-

ily feature, except for a generic faucet on the front (symbolizing the freedom that water in an arid country like Iran affords), and is, therefore, devoid of emotional gesture.

Lyric Persian poetry, and particularly the form of the *ghazal* (a short poem with a monorhyme, seven to twelve verses long, usually about worldly and divine love), features some general characteristics that also help to elucidate the qualities of this sculpture. According to Annemarie Schimmel, a noted scholar on mystical poetry, the *ghazal* is not 'meant to describe exactly this or that state of mind or to tell of the poet's personal situation in such a way that one can speak of a unique experience. [...] the *ghazal* is not meant to explain and illuminate the poet's feelings: on the contrary, it is meant to veil them' (Schimmel 1992: 3). This tendency to veil rather than to explain emotions can be found in the first two lines of the *ghazal* entitled Happiness, written by Hafiz (1330–1389):

The phoenix of felicity
Shall fall into my net at last
If e'er the blessed shade of thee
Should rest upon me riding past

Like bubbles rising in a glass
I'll throw my cap into the air
If by my goblet thou dost pass
And lettest fall thy image there
(Arberry 1948: 131)

Hafiz does not expound on the immediate feeling of happiness, or closely describe the cause of it. Instead he hides behind metaphors ('the phoenix of felicity shall fall into my net') or makes a side step by describing the actions resulting from happiness ('like bubbles rising in a glass I'll throw my cap into the air'). This idea of simul-

taneously revealing and obscuring emerges not only in poetry, but also in other dimensions of Persian culture, most notably in the architecture of the ubiquitous shrines, the grilles of which obstruct view and access, but simultaneously render the grave inside visible. Both the shrine's grille and the poem draw an artful circle – consisting of metal rods and words, respectively – around their essential content, be it a grave or the feeling of happiness.

Along the same lines, Tanavoli reveals his emotions and ideas merely by creating his sculptures and exhibiting his inner world. Yet, at the same time he hides these revelations behind the veil of abstraction. He reduces possibly telling elements to simple geometric forms that give few clues to the viewer, just as Hafiz reduces his idea of happiness to an indefinite 'phoenix of felicity'.

Heech and Chair II, 1973

Heech and Chair II operates as a visual pun. The word *heech* (nothing) appears here in the shape of a cat sitting huddled on the chair's surface. The cat's head consists of the letter *ha*. Two holes stand for two eyes, and the top part culminates in a little peak that can be seen as an ear. Calligraphers call the initial shape of the letter *ha*, as it appears here, *wajh al-hirr* (cat's face) in Arabic. Also, traditional calligraphic literature often plays with imagery of the *ha* as a weeping face. Therefore, Tanavoli's interpretation of the *heech* as a cat builds upon a traditional metaphor – and even elaborates it by giving the cat a body. The top of the letter *djeem* is fashioned to evoke a cat's back and thigh, while its down-stroke literally becomes a tail. The sadness that calligraphic literature and poetry attribute to the letter *ha* also finds expression: the

entire ensemble appears as a shy little creature, looking out into the world with sad eyes, as it huddles into the chair.

Another literary convention exemplified in *Heech and Chair II* is that of the metaphor. If viewed in the most superficial manner, the sculpture is a charming image of a cat sitting on a chair. In the same vein, a poem about the beauty of a beloved can be reduced to the evocation of a charming image, as in Hafiz's *ghazal Radiance*:

The radiance of thy body's gleam
The moon doth far exceed;
Before thy face the rose doth seem
Lack-lustre as a weed

The corner of thy arched brow
My spirit doth possess,
And there is not a king, I vow,
Dwells in such loveliness
(Arberry 1948: 135)

Underneath all this charm, however, we can uncover a deeper meaning. Metaphors centring on the beloved or love are employed particularly in the poetry that grew out of the mystical branch of Islam, Sufism. In Sufi poetry – Tanavoli's favourite poet Rumi is its greatest exponent – the love for a human being stands for the love of God, the beloved is God himself, and the beloved's beauty is a reflection of the beauty of God. The word *heech* (nothing) in Tanavoli's sculpture works similarly, as attested by the sculptor himself: "Nothing" is an aspect of God. God is in all things and therefore in everything. The "nothing" is not God, but is a place where God could be in his purest state' (Morrison 1971: 10B). Thus, both the poem and the sculpture can express the presence of God through the same means, that is, the metaphor. In the case of the poem, it is the beloved that is a metaphor for God: in the case of the sculpture, it is the *heech*. ◀



Parviz Tanavoli, *Poet with the Symbol of Freedom*, 1962

Parviz Tanavoli

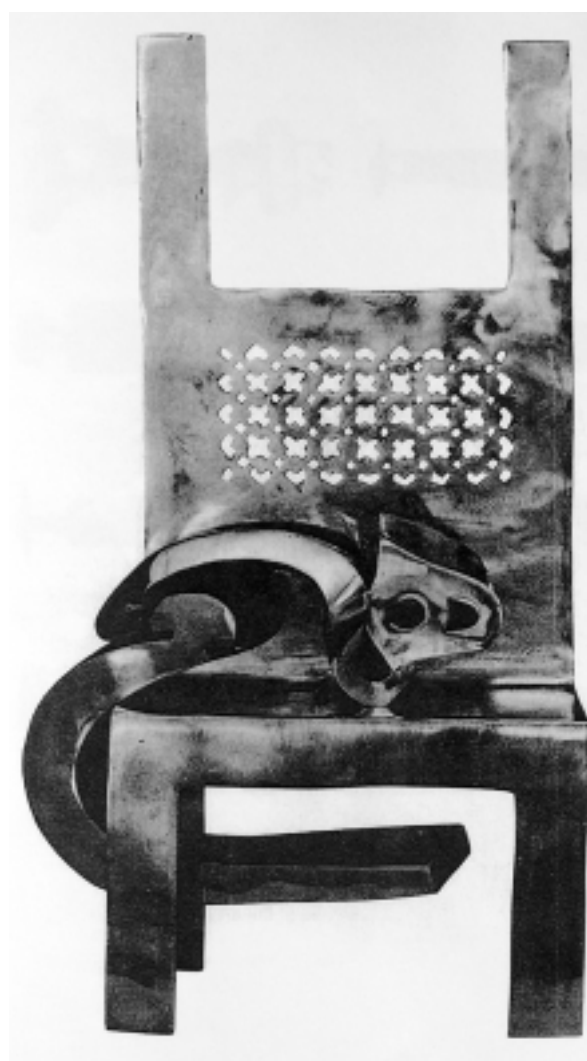
Parviz Tanavoli

Born in Tehran in 1937, Tanavoli benefited from Reza Shah Pahlavi's quest for modernization/westernization. After Western-style art education had been introduced to Iran, Tanavoli graduated as the first student from the new sculpture programme at the Tehran School of Arts in 1956. Subsequently he went to Italy in order to study under the well-known sculptor Marino Marini (1901–1980). Marini's awareness of the past traditions of his native country, and their incorporation into his contemporary work, led Tanavoli to explore his own cultural heritage and to search for a style suitable to express Persia's past achievements in a modern way. However, due to religious prescriptions against the creation of images, Iranian sculptural production ceased with the advent of Islam in the eighth century. Thus, the only way to integrate Persia's Islamic heritage into his works was to look at arts other than sculpture, such as Persian classical poetry, considered to be the epitome of Iranian-Islamic cultural production.

After several successful years abroad, Tanavoli returned to Tehran to teach at the College of Decorative Arts. He also established his first studio, the Atelier Kaboud, a meeting place for artists. In 1962, Tanavoli was invited to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design as a visiting artist. During the early sixties, his pieces were exhibited at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Walker Art Center, poets and prophets being his main subjects.

When Tanavoli returned to Iran in 1964, he helped with the establishment of the Sculpture Department at the University of Tehran. A major turning point in Tanavoli's career was a show at the Galerie Borghese in Tehran in 1965, where his works addressed the modernization of Iranian lifestyle and the combination of new technological phenomena with traditional culture. This exhibition marked the arrival of the *heech* (nothing) in Tanavoli's oeuvre, a theme that would occupy him for the following nine years and become his trademark.

The Revolution brought Tanavoli's career in Iran almost to an end, since he produced objects considered to contradict the precepts of Islam. Tanavoli retired from his position at the University of Tehran and is now an independent artist and author.



Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech and Chair II*, 1973

Parviz Tanavoli

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