

Unparalleled Collection of Modern Art from India, Iran, and Turkey on view at The Block Museum

“Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU’s Abby Weed Grey Collection” offers new view of global modernity



Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu (Turkish) Full Moon, 1961, Oil and glue on canvas, 50 7/8 x 42 in., Grey Art Gallery, New York University, Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.293

A major exhibition opening at The Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University on January 21, 2020, seeks to expand Western perspectives of modern art. [Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish and Indian Highlights from NYU’s Abby Weed Grey Collection](#) surveys art from three nations where unique and vibrant forms of modernism sprang forth in the 1960s and 70s. Challenging histories of artistic modernism that too often begin and end in the West, *Modernisms* explores an under-recognized flowering of innovation and risk-taking in art beyond Europe and North America.

Organized by New York University’s [Grey Art Gallery](#)

Modernisms, draws 114 selected works from the collection of curator and Grey Gallery patron Abby Weed Grey. The first major museum exhibition to bring together modern art from Iran, Turkey and India, *Modernisms* sheds new light on how artists

of the period created works that drew on their specific heritages while also engaging in global discourses.

“Drawing on a range of influences including local traditions and the sights and sounds of modern life, artists from these nations forged distinctive new modes of expression,” says Block Museum Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs, Kathleen Bickford Berzock. “These artworks represent a wide range of responses to unique, regional histories and to a rapidly changing world in the mid-20th century. It is an extraordinary opportunity to have these works in one exhibition, allowing us to see with fresh eyes that global art is a central component of modernity.”

On view from January 21 to April 5, 2020 at Northwestern University’s Block Museum of Art, the exhibition premiered at NYU’s Grey Gallery from September 10 – December 7, 2019

and will travel to the New York University Abu Dhabi Art Gallery in fall 2020. Curated by Lynn Gumpert, Director of the Grey Art Gallery, the exhibition’s presentation at The Block is overseen by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs, and Michael Metzger, Pick-Laudati Curator of Media Arts. The exhibition is accompanied by a 288-page catalogue [Modernisms: Iranian, Turkish, and Indian Highlights from NYU’s Abby Weed Grey Collection](#), co-published by Hirmer Publishers and the Grey Art Gallery,

Multiple Modernities

Modernisms participates in ongoing discourse seeking to critically reexamine the canon of modern art, including projects like the recent renovated galleries of New



Maqbool Fida Husain (Indian) Virgin Night, 1964, Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 29 1/2 in. Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.158

York's Museum of Modern Art, with their expanded presentation of works created by artists from around the globe.

“*Modernisms* makes significant contributions to current dialogues which are actively seeking to expand narrow, Eurocentric narratives of modern art. This exhibition tells a story of ‘multiple modernities’, reflecting the diversity of formal and cultural responses to the changing world of the 1960s and 70s” says Michael Metzger, The Block Museum Pick-Laudati Curator of Media Arts.



Parviz Tanavoli (Iranian), Heech, 1972, Bronze on wood base, 22 1/4 x 12 x 8 in. Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.54 © Parviz Tanavol

“Modernisms” is the second presentation in The Block Museum’s [“Year of Global Modernisms”](#) highlighting the diversity of mid-20th-century art as it is entwined with culture and politics around the globe. In Fall 2019 The Block presented [Pop América 1965-1975](#) the first exhibition to unify Latin American and Latinx expressions of Pop Art from across the hemisphere. In spring of 2020 the museum will showcase [Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s – 1980s](#). Concurrent to *Modernisms* The Block will present Terence Gower’s [Ciudad Moderna](#), a 2004 media work investigating the modernist contemporary built environments of 1960s Mexico.

“Northwestern University and The Block Museum of Art are committed to fostering global perspectives in teaching and learning.

The global framework helps us consider contemporary issues and allows us new ways to think about history and its narratives,” notes Block Museum Director, Lisa Corrin.

An Unparalleled Collection

Modernisms draws from the collection of curator and patron Abby Weed Grey (1902-1983). With nearly 700 artworks, the Abby Weed Grey Collection represents the largest institutional assemblage of modern Iranian and Turkish art outside of Iran

and Turkey as well as the most important trove of modern Indian art in an American university museum.

In the 1960s and early '70s, when few other American collectors were attuned to art being made in the Middle East and Asia, Grey traveled extensively in these regions, steadily acquiring works by contemporary local artists. Intent on self-education and optimistically embracing the notion of “one world through art,” she believed firmly in the power of art to stimulate dialogues between people of different cultures. This vision arose at a moment when, due to the shifting dynamics of the Cold War, America held a broader interest in fostering intercultural dialogue that was motivated, in part, by foreign policy strategy.

With her robust, international collection of paintings, sculptures and works on paper, the collector founded NYU’s Grey Art Gallery in 1975. Although works from the collection have been shown at the Grey on previous occasions—selections from the Iranian, Turkish, and Indian modern art holdings have never been presented together in a cross-cultural study.



Kamran Diba (Iranian) Diver, 1967, Oil on canvas, 80 3/4 x 34 1/4 in. Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.86

“These works are the highlights of a collection unsurpassed in its depth and breadth by any other in the U.S. Whether visitors are interested in the politics of this time and region or the artistic achievements of individual artists, the exhibition offers unique opportunities to satisfy one’s curiosity,”

—Michael FitzGerald, [*The Wall Street Journal*](#).

Modernisms Exhibition Highlights

From Iranian and Turkish artists who explored calligraphy and ornamentation through avant-garde abstraction, to Indian painters whose expressive canvases drew upon Hindu iconography, the works in *Modernisms* reflect a lively dialogue between East and West, past and present.

Iran

Iranian intellectuals and artists of the 1960s “participated in various movements and experiments as they sought to craft diverse modern, secular, and radical visions for the nation,” write scholars Ali Mirsepassi and Hamed Yousefi in an essay in the exhibition’s publication. The exhibition features innovative work by members of the Saqqakhaneh school, such as **Parviz Tanavoli**, **Faramarz Pilaram**, **Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi**. These artists sought to reinterpret Iran’s rich traditions of calligraphy, architecture, and ornamentation in contemporary idioms. For instance, Tanavoli rooted much of his work in Iranian folklore, but developed a new pictorial language to recast traditional stories as modern sculptures. Pilaram drew on the awe-inspiring architectural components of the mosques of Isfahan, the city of his birth, but merged them with bodily fragments to create hybrid designs. Zenderoudi referenced Shiite iconography and Persian calligraphy in his oeuvre but transformed them into abstract, flowing forms. Works by other Iranian artists, such as **Siah Armajani**, who emigrated to Minnesota in 1960, are informed by depictions of language and the pictorial relationship between word and image. Also included in the exhibition is a floral monotype by **Monir Farmanfarmaian**, who spent most of her career in New York and is best known for her mirrored works that recall Iranian mosaics. Like the Saqqakhaneh school, these artists grappled with questions of how to reconcile their contemporary sensibilities with their Persian heritage.



Faramarz Pilaram (Iranian), Mosques of Isfahan (B), c. 1962, Ink, watercolor, and gold and silver paint on paper 45 3/4 x 34 3/4 in. Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.110



Eren Eyüboğlu (Turkish) Design for Mosaic, 1957, Gouache and pencil on cardboard, 18 3/4 x 20 in. Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.246

Turkey

Modernisms highlights Turkey's Group D artists, including **Abidin Eldergolu** and **Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu**, two among a veritable roster of Istanbul's modernist visionaries who sought to cast off earlier styles and aesthetics—such as Impressionism and Western academic styles—in favor of art representing a new Turkey, one that would embody both Turkish consciousness and international awareness. In his quest to create a uniquely Turkish modernism, Eldergolu looked to the native abstract art of calligraphy, thus foregrounding conceptual connections between local Turkish artistic forms and international

modernist abstract art. Eyüboğlu sought inspiration in Turkey's rich pastoral life, often portraying farms and peasant activities. Other Turkish artists of this time, such as **Nezhat Akoral**, depicted scenes of village life and labor through the lens of Turkey's many urban migrants. In contrast, **Fahrelnissa Zeid** looked to another kind of Turkish heritage—the geometric and curvilinear forms of Turkish ornamentation and architecture—which she incorporated into her images. The multitude of styles found in the Turkish works on view reflect the great diversity of expression that constitutes Turkey's modernist scene.

India

In the wake of their country's independence from British rule, Indian artists began experimenting with new approaches, forming the nation's first modernist schools. Several works in the exhibition are by members of the influential Progressive Artists Group (PAG), which broke away from the traditional Indian nationalist art movement to form an avant-garde collective that looked outward to other cultures and drew inspiration from abroad. Clearly embracing cultural hybridity, **Maqbool Fida Husain** blended cubism and expressionism with traditional Indian iconography to create his own vocabulary of darkly expressive forms. **Francis Newton Souza**, founder of PAG, often combined deconstructed human forms with Hindu iconography, merging outside influences with local religious imagery. *Modernisms* also includes work by more experimental artists working in India who have been overlooked in the West until now, but who were also seeking ways to incorporate modern techniques. One such artist, **Prabhakar Barwe**, combined Tantric styles culled from

his time spent in Varanasi, India's holiest city, with abstract symbolism largely inspired by the work of Paul Klee.



Prabhakar Barwe (Indian) King and Queen of Spades, 1967, Oil and paper on canvas, 39 1/4 x 54 1/8 in. Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection. Gift of Abby Weed Grey, G1975.188

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Northwestern University's [Block Museum of Art](#) is a dynamic, imaginative and innovative teaching and learning resource for the University and its surrounding communities, featuring a global exhibition program that crosses time periods and cultures and serves as a springboard for thought-provoking discussions relevant to our lives today. Admission to the museum is always free and open to all.