

Ali Akbar Sadeghi: National Artist

Faryar Javaherian / 2017

One of the great mysteries of art history, and one which will always be speculated upon, is why Leonardo Da Vinci never turned in the *Mona Lisa* to its rightful owner, the wealthy Florentine merchant Giocondo?

Like so many others, I have also pondered on this question for the last few years and come up with my own biased answer: A great work of art, for me, is one that we'd hang in front of our bed, so that when we wake up in the morning, its sight gives us the will to get up and begin a new day. It radiates with a *joie de vivre*, which gives us the energy to go on, and it does so with amazing constancy, year after year and sometimes decade after decade.

In the case of Leonardo, we know that he took three paintings with himself when he went into exile in France in 1516, residing first in Chateau d'Amboise in the court of Francois 1er and then in Cloux where his life ended. De Beatis, his doctor, mentions the three paintings in his notes:

Sainte Anne and the Virgin, whose date of painting is not exactly known, *Saint John the Baptist*, dated 1513-1515, and finally *La Gioconda*, which dates from 1503 to 1519, because the latest X-ray analyses show that Leonardo kept reworking it until his last days...

I would imagine that Leonardo took these paintings with him towards the end of his life because, of all of his works, these were his favorites and not just the most recent. – particularly in the case of *Gioconda*, which dates from years before the other works in this batch of three. He was so in love with it that he kept frolicking with it for sixteen years... Was it because he was in love with his model, or was he rather in love with his own work? My guess is that he simply loved to look at this work, often, almost on a daily basis, and this is the reason he couldn't part with it.

Isn't this the most basic criterion we have for judging art: how we love to watch it again and again, without ever getting tired of it?

The feeling the artist had for this particular work, which compelled him to take it with himself wherever he went, was that he just loved to watch it all the time.

I am naively suggesting that art endures when, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, people still enjoy watching it.

Faryar Javaherian: What is the painting you have hung in front of your bed?



Ali Akbar Sadeghi: From 1959 to 2005 it was an erotic painting of Shirin and Farhad. But then I had to get rid of it, and I gave it to my sister. Now it is a painting that shows the hand of Michelangelo's David as though it has just cracked an egg into a frying pan...

F.J. Drawing and painting are like a meditation, the mind stops working and the unconscious takes over...

A.A.S. In the morning when I open my eyes, I am happy to see that the day has begun and I can start painting.

F.J. The work you lent me for my Picnic exhibition, THE GARDEN OF LOVE, is dated 1980-2010. Did you really work on it for 30 years? Was it because you loved it so much that you did not want to finish it and part with it, like Leonardo who worked on the *Mona Lisa* for 16 years?

A.A.S. The original sketch for this work dated from 1980. The first designs were about a Persian wedding. Then I developed it into four gardens. I have hundreds of sketches in pencil or pen and every once in a while I go back to them and decide to develop them into a large painting. The creative sparkle is in those small black and white drawings.

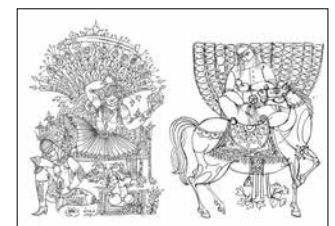
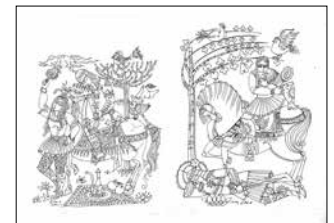
F.J. In all those years of working, did it ever happen that you worked again and again on a special painting? My friend Abolghassem Saidi, for instance, who lives and works in Paris, borrows his own works from his collectors every time he comes back to Tehran, sometimes 30 - or 40- year-old works, only to work on them again...

A.A.S. No, for me when a work is over, it is over, and I move on to the next one. But I often go back to my old primary sketches.

Ali Akbar Sadeghi's sketches cover a period going from the 1950s to the present, an activity that he will undoubtedly continue to his last days, because this is the sustenance of his life. Five years ago, at the age of seventy five, he published his autobiography and it is clear that his childhood



Masses.1988
[Oil on Canvas . 76 x 60 cm]



Sketches for Love Garden . 2010
[Ink, Gold & Silver Leaf On Cardboard
Mounted On Wood 190x170 cm]



Love Garden. 2010
[Ink, Gold & Silver Leaf on Cardboard,
Mounted on Wood. 190 x 170 cm]

1. Ali Akbar Sadeghi: *A Complete Drawing Collection from Childhood to Present*. p 13, 2010
2. Ibid. p 15
3. اوبس ماشالله.
4. Ibid. p18



Seventh Trial of Esfandiar
[Collection of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art]



Tenth Joust of the Rooks: Barta versus Kuhram
[Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr, 1970. 301.45]



Division . 1977
[Oil on Canvas . 70x50 cm]

memories are the most vivid: at the age of five he got his first colored-pencil box from his uncle Ehsan¹ who also brought him some TIME and LIFE magazines and Sadeghi remembers how he loved watching the images and fall asleep while looking at them and see them again in his dreams... and how even now his dreams are filled with images². He loved to go to the butcher's because of the *Coffee-house* painting hanging on the wall and would stare at it so long it would transport him to another world until the butcher would shout at him to take his meat and get out... and later on to Oos Mashallah's cafe³ where many such paintings were hanging⁴.

Like most artists, all his life he will try to recreate that paradisiac period of childhood. But why is childhood the most paradisiac period of our lives, for all of us, whether we are artists or not, whether poor or rich? For me there is but one simple answer: as children we do not realize that we are mortal. The innocence we attribute to children is not because they are angels - sometimes they can be very cruel – but because of the ignorance of their own death. Many children witness the death of nearby people, especially in wars now so explicitly shown in the media, but even there we see that a few minutes later the children are playing and laughing... From the moment that we know that we are going to die, we are ejected from the paradise of childhood, and this is why it is so difficult to keep the child within us alive. And this is also why anything that reminds us of our childhood brings us joy.

All the images, events and feelings related to our childhood are stored in a treasure which artists tap best for recreating that lost paradise.

It is obvious that Sadeghi's works are deeply influenced by *Coffee-House* painting as an attempt to re-enter the paradise of his childhood, later becoming a style he mechanically or almost unconsciously follows. He makes amazingly skilful compositions and draws them neatly and beautifully in small scale before reproducing them in large scale and applying paint to them. Later on he would also look at miniature paintings and many of the scenes he saw of heroes battling against foes in his childhood – whether religious in *Coffee-House* paintings or mythic in miniatures as from *Shahnameh* stories or other poetic legends– are the very foundation of the imagery he uses. I have found two miniatures from the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp where the splitting of the head is explicitly and literally shown, an image which often recurs in Sadeghi's works and I imagine that seeing such scenes in childhood must have made an indelible impression on him.

These two miniatures are the *Seventh Trial of Esfandiar*: He crosses the River and Slays Gurgsar from the *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, which we are lucky to have in the collection of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, and the *Tenth Joust of the Rooks: Barta versus Kuhram*, also from the Shah Tahmasp folio, currently kept in the Metropolitan Museum.

By using again and again an image of himself for characters whose head is being split in two in his works, Sadeghi is actually showing himself as the foe, the bad guy, the anti-hero and I think this is a self-deprecatory portrait the artist is drawing of himself. He does not try to beautify his face; he draws a portrait of himself as a frightened face, which necessarily becomes a frightening one. He is a person who is divided within him, between evil and good, between now and the past, between reality and imagination. In one painting he even depicts himself as searching for a head in a cabinet pointing to the fact that he has many faces. And indeed the man and his works are complex, although he tries to depict himself as a simple person.

Sadeghi uses the elements of *Coffee-House* or miniature painting not in a superficial or imitative manner, but by organically assimilating those elements into his paintings. It looks like he has swallowed the characters, digested them and then spat them out again. His characters are the mythic ones of the *Shahnameh* or the religious ones of *Coffe-House* paintings, but in his works they become more abstract and arcane. Interestingly, most of these characters are self-portraits

and the spooky scenes he creates are really frightening sometimes. He likes to frighten people with all kinds of spooks.

F.J. In most of your works, characters are portrayed with faces reminiscent of yours. Why?

A.A.S. I don't do it consciously. Most portraits an artist paints look like self-portraits; because, I think, the image they see most is that of their own self in the mirror. It's really out of my hands, it's unconscious. Many people are scared of me; they say that I am violent.

Coffee-House paintings are extremely large because they were used as backdrops by a Naqqal, a raconteur who would tell stories of the Shahnameh, the same stories painted in the Shahnameh miniatures.

Persian painting is principally intertwined with Persian literature and we often have the poem calligraphed on the painting that itself depicts the very story of that poem. It is as though the poet and the painter are describing the same scene but with different media, until the beginning of Qajar era, when Persian painting was exposed to and influenced by European traditions..

F.J. What is the book that has most influenced you?

A.A.S. *100 Years of Solitude*. Last week I had an interview and was asked if I could invite five virtual writers, who would they be, and I immediately answered: Ferdawsi, Molana, Marquez, Aref Qazvini and Sohrab Sepehri. For a long time I was scared of reading books because I was afraid they would influence my painting too much, I feared that I would try to draw or depict what I was reading in them.

It is absolutely clear that a literary narrative informs Sadeghi's works and the main corpus of his sixty years of artistic production owes mostly to our literary tradition and therefore to the *Coffee-house* and miniature paintings, distinctly Persian styles. But as he went to university and began to study art history, Qajar painting and later European painting also became sources of inspiration to him.

Arash Sadeghi: One of the most creative periods in my father's work was when he was in Kanoon [The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults]. Animation films gave him the possibility to integrate the stories and the drawings.

If I were to classify the immense artistic production of Sadeghi into broad categories, because it is not possible to distinguish chronological periods, since he goes back and forth between these various categories – remember the trove of hundreds of sketches – it would be these four:

-the works informed by *Coffee-house* and miniature paintings, undoubtedly the largest and major category;

-those informed by Qajar paintings;

-the works influenced by calligraphy;

-and finally those that are marked by European styles, which can be subdivided into three further categories, those informed by Surrealism, the psychedelic works and those with a literal icon taken from the canons of Western art and used as a pastiche. All in all seven categories, which can then be mixed into various combinations, going up to an almost infinite number of possibilities. The animation films, the sculptural works, the stained glasses, the illustrations and all the graphic works also belong to one or another of these four main categories.

However there is a predominant category from this classification in each work: for instance the painting *Symbol*, thus titled perhaps because of the bitten apple, definitely follows the aesthetic principles of Qajar painting, but with a literal European element parading in it: *Mona Lisa's* face.



Symbol . 1997
[Oil on Canvas . 121x61 cm]



Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs . 1559
[Oil on Oak Panel . 117x163 cm]

And of course the presence of *Mona Lisa* in this painting makes us smile. Sadeghi's works are ingenious flights of fancy and humorous inventions full of wit. His compositions are always a combination of strange objects, comical and yet full of meaning, lending themselves to more than one interpretation, which is also characteristic of Persian poetry. In *Symbol*, is he trying to say that all these women here have bitten the apple and are smitten with the primordial sin of Eve? Or are they condemning the biting of the apple, since it is held on a spear by the woman-warrior clad in iron accessories – the apple being the symbol of life but also that of our planet earth in his works – and that they are not really living a good life and are destroying our planet earth? There is an imminent truth trying to break through his works, but in a contradictory and complex manner difficult to summarize in one view, thus the two faces or the many faces of the artist...

F.J. Which Western painters have influenced you the most?

A.A.S. Vermeer, Bosch and Bruegel.

Sadeghi's works can easily be coupled with those of Bosch and Bruegel, but less so with Vermeer's. Of course Peter Bruegel the Elder rendered a lot of Dutch proverbs in his paintings, and so does Sadeghi take literary anecdotes, mythic poems or proverbs and just like Bruegel he has mastered the art of transforming those words and ideas into sketches and then paintings.

Both artists are always groping for a truth to break through their works. Although Sadeghi claims that he is not an intellectual, there is a great amount of thinking in the production of his works, taking a word, a phrase, a proverb, a poem or a legend, and transforming those into painting is an intellectual process. Both artists elevate the literal and naive traditions of their nations to a satirical level that reveals their extraordinary sense of irony. Both have a pessimistic view of humankind, of the topsy-turvy world we live in, a worldview which is best revealed in chaos, but finally because of the distance they place between themselves and reality by taking an ironic stance, they shine as humanist artists.

Where Sadeghi's art totally departs from Bruegel is his view of reality, and this he does very easily because of the long tradition of Persian painting which has nothing to do with reality but is a total production of the imagination, a reflection of the *imago mundi* that Persian artists retained until the Qajar period when European realism found its way into Persian painting.

Sadeghi's art is totally disassociated from reality, for although he paints real figures and objects, he places them in such unfamiliar combinations and backgrounds that it is difficult to associate them with reality. However they are always fused into a seemingly coherent whole and there lies his real art: making unfamiliar things look familiar to us. At the center of this imaginary world, he has placed himself, present in almost all of his works.

F.J. Depicting yourself in so many works, and repeating your portrait when there is a multitude of characters in your works, isn't it a form of narcissism?

A.S. Yes, he is narcissistic.

A.A.S. No, I am not narcissistic, but I am satisfied with my family and myself. I am just an ordinary person: I cannot quit smoking... I get up at 9 in the morning, do 15 minutes of exercise, and then have breakfast. At 10:30 I go to my studio and work till 1:30, then I go downstairs to eat lunch. I read the news in the paper, particularly the page about incidents and accidents, and take a nap till 4- 4:15. Then I take some tea and go back to my studio at 5:15 to work until 8pm. I go downstairs to eat fruit, drink a glass of water and we eat dinner at 9:30. I watch TV serials till midnight when we go to sleep. And this routine is repeated every day; I rarely go out of the house. Yesterday the children took us to a restaurant almost by force; I hadn't been out of the house for 20 days.

This again is a very self-deprecatory vision of himself that he describes. It is as though the artist

and his works are caught in a dilemma, which can only be solved through irony, this bitter/sweet form of humor he practices in his life and his works.

F.J. What happened in 2005-2006 when you became so depressed that you could not draw or paint?

A.A.S. I am very satisfied with that one year because I wrote down everything that went through my mind and now it's part of my artistic work

A.S. I just reread those poems and edited the book for a reprint, in most of them he repeats, "Get up and get some work done, enough is enough..."

I have only read a few of these writings, because they are printed with small black characters on red paper very damaging to the eyes, but maybe precisely printed in this way to make them difficult to read, to render them esoteric just like many of his paintings, and the same worldview prevails in them as in all of his art: he deconstructs the legends of our literary masterpieces like the *Shahnameh* or *Vis and Ramin*, to reconstruct them in his own ironic way.

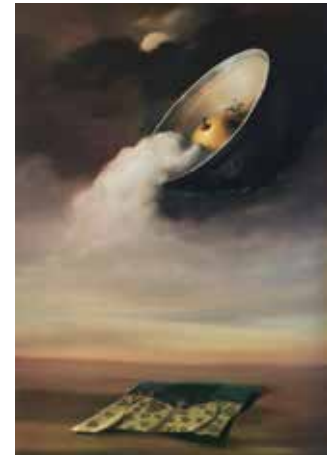
He is so imbued with these mythic characters; he knows them so well, that he ends up identifying with them and this is perhaps why he represents all of them with his own face, not because of narcissism, but because these characters are a part of his identity. This is why he has named his three sons after the characters in the *Shahnameh*. And this is why I would say that Sadeghi is a national artist. When he makes perfect pastiches of Mona Lisa, or a Degas ballerina, he places them on shaky grounds: he does know his art history, he can even replicate them perfectly, but they do not belong to his world. Or when he paints a totally surrealistic scene with an apple in a flying bowl, which could read as a European surrealist painting, he cannot refrain from adding some Persian elements to it, the parchment from a torn miniature with typical trees and flowers, and the little bird in the bowl.

And finally he is a national artist because only those who are very well informed of our literary traditions can have a proper reading of his works. So there is something primitive, almost archaic to his work, especially when placed in the context of 21st-century art movements. He cannot fit into any of those movements; he is a movement all to his own.

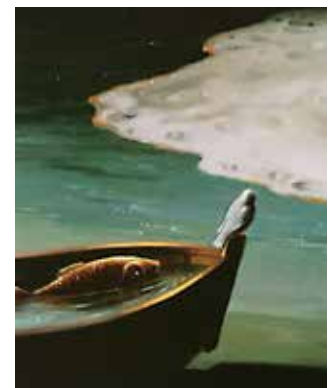
We have to look for hidden messages and clues in his works to be able to interpret them.

He delivers two such clues himself in his autobiography: "one of my pastimes in those days [in early childhood] was to pierce an apple with several strands of wood and then push another piece of wood right in its middle. I would secure two branches on either side of a water canal. [And place the stranded apple in between] Because of the running water the apple would rotate like the wheel of a mill. You don't know what a pleasure that rotating apple was. Maybe it is because of that moment that the apple became symbolic in so many of my works." And further on he adds: "My father took me as an apprentice to a carpenter's shop... My job there was to straighten crooked nails, and maybe it is those very nails that have become symbolic in so many of my paintings and sculptural works."⁵

His vision of the world in this period of his life is probably contained in the painting that hangs in front of his bed, *Masses*: the hand of Michelangelo's David, reminding us of another work by Michelangelo, God's hand held out to Adam's in the center of the Sistine Chapel. Sadeghi himself made the gesture that David's hand seems to have just cracked an egg into the pan... So God's hand is delivering us a fried egg as manna from the sky. Many times in the evening I would call Abbas Kiarostami – a close friend of Sadeghi for 62 years, "the only friend who never betrayed me" as Sadeghi would say – and he would tell me, "I'll call you back in 20 minutes, I am having some fried eggs, I don't want them to get cold." In his 100-second film for the centenary of the Lumière Brothers, Kiarostami made a film entirely consisting of the close-up of two eggs being



Series . 1992
[Oil on Canvas . 51x76 cm]



Detail of Masses . 1987
[Oil on Canvas . 60x76 cm]

5. Ali Akbar Sadeghi: *A Complete Drawing Collection from Childhood to Present*. p 17, 2010

fried in a pan, echoing the utmost solitude of the artist. And yet the soundtrack prevents us from feeling sorry for him, for we hear the voice of Isabelle Huppert on the answering machine who is begging him to pick up the phone and get reconciled with her... I guess fried eggs have a special meaning for both friends, because they often recur in both artists' works: it is symbolic of the best nourishment man has among all of the bounties bestowed on him.

Sadeghi is thankful for all the bounty the sky gives us, a whole ocean covered with a gigantic fried egg with a blue yoke! But what is the meaning of the small boat filled with water, with a fish in it and a dove sitting on its edge?

As always, the meanings of Sadeghi's works are multilayered, various and complex. For me the little boat is a microcosm of the world we live in or are trapped in, swimming in it like a fish. Interestingly now the edges of the fried egg look like the foam of sea waves in this detail... However the fish has an eye to the ocean and could leap into it anytime it wanted to. The little dove has a more advantageous position in this world because it can just fly and oversee both worlds, the eternity of the ocean as well as the microcosmic world of the boat.

F.J. When Abbas [Kiarostami] died, did it create an interruption in your work?

A.A.S. No, I am a realistic person. We are born one day, and one day we must die. I am a disciplined worker.

Sadeghi is a quiet and thoughtful man, a family man thousands of miles away from the turbulent life of his closest friend, Kiarostami. He lives in a three-floor house built for him by his friend Jodat, an austere and almost monk-like architect; he lives on the ground floor where his wife of 52 years dedicatedly maintains the household for him, his studio is on the middle floor and his son Arash lives on the top floor. But he himself told me that he would always be ready with jokes in the company of others. He has definite libertine aspects to his personality, but all in all he has tried to rise to one common truth to all of humankind and the prevailing message that pervades the work and the man is Love: love for mankind, love for Nature, love for our planet, in short love of life.

He is a professional artist who works in a daily disciplined way. If music is the breath of life to the musician, drawing and painting are the breath of life to Sadeghi. At the end of the red book with the title *Life*, Sadeghi has a conversation with himself and says: "I have won a lot of prizes for my films and my paintings. But the best prize is the pleasure I feel when the colors I apply on the canvas come out as I have in mind, or even better."⁶

F.J. For the last two hours I have tried to figure out who your muse is... It is you, or it is in yourself.

6. *Life*, in Ali Akbar Sadeghi - *The Complete works (Life - Love - Lost)*, 3 vols., ed. Ali Bakhtiari, trans. Sanam Kalantari, Ali Akbar Sadeghi Foundation, London, 2016, p. 523



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