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LEYLA DIBA

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INTERVIEWEE: LEYLA DIBA

INTERVIEWER: TANYA FARMANFARMAIYAN

NEW YORK: AUGUST 7 AND 13, 1984

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4343 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 200
Bethesda, Md. 20814, Telephone: (301) 657-1990

PREFACE

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews conducted for the Oral History of Iran Program of Foundation for Iranian Studies by Tanya Farmanfarmaiyan with Leyla Diba in New York, in August 7 and 13, 1984.

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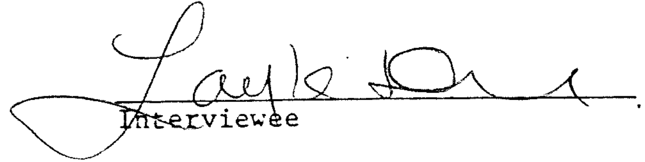

Interviewee

Tanya Farmanfarmian

Interviewer

January 24, 1990

Date of Agreement

Contempoary Art of Iran/Negarestan Museum

Subject of Tapes

4343 Montgomery Avenue, Suite 200
Bethesda, Md. 20814, Telephone: (301) 657-1990

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Leyla Diba was born to an American mother and a Persian father of the Sudavar family. Much of her early years were spent in Europe and the U.S. Upon completing her Master's degree in Fine Arts on the subject of Qajar paintings she returned to Iran, marrying a member of the Diba family.

Ms. Diba began her career at Her Majesty's Special Bureau, at a time when the Bureau was becoming increasingly interested in the arts, and especially in filling the lacuna in museum activities left by the Ministry of Culture and Arts. Ms. Diba became the curator/director of Negarestan Museum, and a member of the planning group for the future of museums in Iran. She was therefore active in the formation of Tehran Museum of Contemporary Arts, Carpet Museum, and the Abgineh Museum. Her memoirs moreover, tell of the workings of the Bureau in matters pertaining to the arts, the activities of the nascent artistic-intellectual groups of Tehran in the late-1970s, and the problems confronting museums in traditional socieites.

Interviewee: Leyla Diba Interview #1

Interviewer: Tanya Farmanfarmaiyan Place: New York

Date: August 7 and 13, 1984

Q: The following is an interview with Ms. Leyla Diba, Curator-Director of the Negarestan Museum in Teheran. This interview was conducted on August 7, 1984. The interviewer is Tanya Farmanfarmaiyan. Leyla, I'd like you first of all for about fifteen or twenty minutes to give me some information on your background: your family, your upbringing, your education, anything that you find important to this interview.

Diba: O.K. It helps if you look at the paper. I'm sort of a mongrel. I'm a product of an educated, middle class Iranian father and an American, Irish-Italian opera singer who met in America. So, I come from a dual background. I was educated abroad because they divorced when I was two years old. I was educated in many different schools in Europe. For a very short period in Iran, for about nine months I went to Mrs. Yarvu's School and just came back to Iran for summers. So I never really was probably a hundred per cent Iranian or spoke fluently Farsi. My father's family were merchants; he was very well educated as was his older brother. They were educated in Germany, and I think this was important in my development, the fact that he graduated from Hamburg University when he was seventeen. And I think he was always very interested in my studies and very proud

of them. So even though I didn't have very much personal contact with him and with my family -- it was very intermittent -- I still felt that there was a strong intellectual achievement there. My mother was an ambitious woman whose career had been thwarted in terms that she really hadn't been able to be a tremendous success at being an opera singer.

I think those two things were kind of important in what happened to me later on. Education-wise, as I said, as a child, a young girl, I spoke many different languages and went to many different schools. Sometimes the school was in that language. My first year was in an Italian school and I spoke Italian. Eventually English became my major language and eventually I settled down in New York and a French lycee there and later on in Paris at the Lycee Victor Duruy where I took a baccalaureat and that was in 1969. After that I went to Wellesley College. I went there without any clear idea of what I was going to do but with a vague idea that I'd go back to Iran. This was against my mother's wishes; she was very anti-Iran in the sense that she hadn't had a very happy background. So she wasn't very confident that I would. I went there wanting to become a poli-sci major and as I said, I had some idea that I was going to go back to Iran and do something with that. But it didn't work out that way. I found I was much better at art history and I enjoyed it more. And I made that my major without any specific concentration on Islamic art. After that I went on to graduate school at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York University.

There they had a very great teacher of Islamic art who became my mentor, if you like, and he was Richard Ettinghausen. And that again sort of determined the direction my studies would take, the same as in college. There was a very vital, sort of interesting personality teacher so that I gravitated to that field and I seemed to do well in it. I seemed to have much more of a natural understanding and feeling for what was then called Islamic art than for what I had been principally interested in which was modern art. So I gravitated towards Islamic art and got very interested in it because of my Persian background. I even had some advantages simply because I had seen the country. I had an idea of how the people felt and talked and had a minimum understanding of Farsi, and made that my major. It was while I was there that a publication came out that was to become my major area of interest, and this was a book published by Sotheby's on Qajar paintings. And it was when I was in school - meaning this was actually before my marriage. This must have been late 1972, maybe 1973 that I had what is called my Ph.D. interview. There you proposed your Ph.D. thesis and it's either accepted or rejected. I proposed that I would write about Qajar painting. And everyone was very thrilled because no one had ever heard of Qajar painting and to have a Ph.D. candidate who was actually going to write about something nobody had ever heard of before; it was wonderful. So they immediately okayed it. It must have been one of the easiest Ph.D. interviews they ever had at the Institute. After that interview and then a certain continuation

of quite a bit of the Ph.D. was the end of my formal education. I didn't finish the Ph.D. I did everything except the very end of the course work. I also did an internship at the Metropolitan Museum for six months in the Islamic Department. So I got an M.F.A. from the Institute of Fine Arts and a museum training certificate which was awarded by the Metropolitan Museum and the Institute.

It was kind of a unique situation that you had a chance to work in a department in the Museum for six months, and got to actually learn how a museum worked. I also took a conservation course which gave me an idea as to how to deal with works of art, how to conserve them and how to work with them. So this was sort of the background with which I came to Iran.

It happened that when I was studying I met my future husband and fell in love and eventually decided to marry. It was a coincidence that the man I fell in love with happened to be related to the Queen and that she happened to be working on just the project that I had been working on in my graduate studies.

Q: Oh, so the work that was to be put into action in the Negarestan was already in her mind and being developed before you returned to Iran?

Diba: It was a very strange coincidence, really, when you think about it, because when the book came out, I fell in love with these paintings. I'd never seen anything like it. I didn't even

know Iranian art had these huge oil paintings. And so, without knowing, I'm pretty sure, I couldn't swear to it, but I'm pretty sure that before it was knowledge back in Iran, I had fallen in love with this topic and started working on it. So it was just a very strange coincidence.

It happened that a friend of mine who was in New York at that time, Fereshteh Daftari, who was studying modern art at Columbia University, went back to Iran before I did, and she went and worked in the Queen's private office in her secretariat and spoke about me to Karim Pasha Bahadori.

Q: Who was at that time --

Diba: Chef du Cabinet.

Q: So --

Diba: Even though we ever had any formal exchange of letters or anything when I was in the States finishing my studies, there was sort of a great optimism that when I went back to Iran, there would be a job for me in the Daftar [Queen's Bureau]. So I finished up my studies and then my husband and I got married. I went back to Iran.

Q: In what year did you go?

Diba: Well, I went for a summer visit in August, 1973. I went right after our marriage and stayed there for about a month, I guess. Then I went back to New York to finish my studies. My husband stayed in Iran and I went back to get my museum training certificate and do the internship at the Met.

I don't remember when exactly I knew I had a job in the secretariat.

Q: You hadn't discussed anything in the short period of time that you'd gone back?

Diba: I really can't remember.

Q: No.

Diba: In the summer I went in and had an interview with Karim Pasha. That's all that I remember, just that I had the interview and that somehow before I went back to New York I knew I was going to be working there. There were no promises that I was going to be running the museum. I was being hired to work in the Queen's office and there happened to be a conjunction of interests.

Q: In what capacity would you have -- you didn't know that either?

Diba: You weren't really given titles. I suppose in Western lingo it would be art consultant. You were an employee in the cultural section of her majesty's secretariat. I guess there was cultural; there was architectural; there was social work; there were different departments, and you were employed in one of the departments. I was not the head of the department. When I came back and started to work, there was me and Fereshteh Daftari and I think a few other Iranians and the head of the section was Firuz Shirvanlu and he was directly responsible to Bahadori.

So I've discussed sort of how things happened in a certain sequence of events. One thing you have is my impressions of Iran. That is kind of interesting because it was very personal. You tend to look back on Iran now and see it in a much more romantic light than you did then. But I think I saw that. I think every Iranian going back at that time saw it as a place of El Dorado, of unlimited possibilities. And I think, obviously going back also with the man I loved made a big difference in how I approached this country.

When I had gone back earlier as a young girl, it had been pretty negative. I'd always been a stranger, an outsider, and had little sense of belonging. Always a strong sense of belonging when I wasn't in the country because I identified very much with my father and with his family. It was the only family I had. But once I was <u>in</u> there, I was constantly comparing it to Europe. Why is there a desert here -- you know, looking for European things in it, which is why when I came back in 1973, I

came back with a very different outlook. I came back with an appreciation of its arts and culture. And it was like a big adventure for me. Was I going to find there everything that had excited me intellectually?

So I came back with a sense of appreciation for everything that I considered ethnically pure, if you like. And my impression, one that's remained with me all these years, is the first night we were there. We went to my brother-in-law's mother's house. As a young couple we were staying with them. It was evening and they and a house in Shemiran. It was very cold. It was cool; it was the summer and it was dark, and there was a garden outside and you had the smell of the night blooming flowers and a group of people who knew each other, were related, loved each other maybe, sitting around this table in the evening. I remember the water in the hoz [pool] and the smell of the flowers and some fresh fruits, and perfume and fresh walnuts. This sort of for me was what I was looking for in Iran. And at the best of times this is what I had, I remember.

Then there were many other times that there was the jarring sense of modernism intruding. I think I basically went back with a very optimistic and a romantic sort of outlook, and yet also an outlook in which I wanted to get the most out of it because I came bringing something. And I wanted very much to do something.

Q: You thought the possibilities were limitless and that you could really influence events.

Diba: And my early impressions were very positive within the limits of the fact that I was very Westernized and that kind of caused cultural shocks.

Q: But they weren't that deep basically, were they, fitting into the society the way you did?

Diba: No. Strangely enough, they were much less than I had thought because there were so many young people my own age whom I could feel a sense of community with. There were young, educated people who were all working and doing something. And for the first time in my life I felt the sense of community and a sense of continuity that immediately made me feel at home. And even though I would have problems, I felt more at home there than anywhere else. I think it was due to the social climate and the fact that there was a job there that I loved. So the culture shocks were not that strong.

Q: And since your husband was related to the Queen, you had a certain life at court. Would you like to give some impressions of life at court, how you saw it?

Diba: Well it was a lot of fun a lot of the time. I was a very young person going in there in many ways, obviously socially unsophisticated. In a sense it was no more or less sophisticated

than any other atmosphere in Iran. I found that Iran was full of "courts." Everybody had their court, and whether you were talking about the prince or princess or a major industrialist or a member of an old family, there were courts everywhere in Iran from the very top on down. No matter who you were, you were either going to be head of the court or one of the courtiers. That was kind of the way I view things.

I viewed the one I was in as perhaps the more glamorous of the lot, and certainly the one which stimulated me and related directly to what I was doing. I think it was a question that "going to court" was not just that; it was participating in history in a sense. There was always something happening that was immediately relevant to what was happening in the country. It was amazing. I sort of viewed it as a learning process.

Q: For example? What do you mean?

Diba: Well, anybody that would be showing up at court, whether it was King Constantine or a head of state or even, I don't know; who was in, who was out. Everything was relevant to what you were doing, and you were privy to information there. That's what made it so exciting about being there; you knew that whatever was happening there was important.

I remember, for instance, the opening of her majesty's library. This was a very beautifully decorated place, but there was a lot of art there; there were a lot of books being amassed;

there was curatorial work being done. So even though many things were social occasions, they were also cultural and historical occasions. And this was I think, what was unique about, if you like, the court we attended, the "we" meaning me and my husband, the people that were familiars of the Queen. There was a constant blending of historical, social and artistic things happening. It was a very lively court. In a way for my husband and I there was a minimum of machinations, a minimum of intrigue, really very little that we had anything to do with.

Q: I would have thought the level of tension would also have been very unique to that particular group.

Diba: No. It depended on the circumstances, and I think there was less tension in that group than anywhere else. There certainly wasn't as much as I [anticipated]. There was a more formal group around the Shah. Sure, there was tension in the sense of people always jockeying for attention, people always looking to see where the important people were and watching sort of what they were saying and this sort of thing. But I think that the main thing was that there were really so many exciting, interesting things happening all the time whether you were going to go and see a sculptor in his studio at Parviz Tanavoli's or the young king was having his first airplane flight or you were going to a festival in Shiraz to see some modern opera or you were attending the museum opening. As I said, it was a life of a

lot of work and a lot of play. But still everything seemed important, you know. Even the least important gesture seemed an historical element in some way. That's what I found unique about being in that atmosphere.

Another thing, I was really impressed by the fact that people, when my husband and I went there, around the Queen, everyone of them, were involved in some kind of social service. Maybe there were one or two that weren't; but everyone there was working. So in spite of what people may think, much of the conversation had to do with work whether it was Kami Diba or it was Lili Amir Arjomand or it was Emilia Karpati or Fereydun Javadi or sometimes Nahavandi would be there or whatever. Majid or Reza Qotbi all of these people. Nazi Diba for instance; most of the time we were really talking about the work we were doing in one form or another because it was a very informal atmosphere in which to be able to solve problems. And what's interesting is that even though sometimes conversations may have been silly or it seemed to people that there was a lot of frivolousness going on, there was a lot of very serious stuff being discussed at the same time. I think like many courts there's sort of an aura of frivolousness that's cultivated, but underneath people are doing very serious things.

Even when we were in Nowshahr for instance, the Queen always had either correspondence she was working on or she would come out two hours after everybody else or she was discussing things with ministers or whatever. I mean that kind of thing was always

going on. So it was, I felt, a very positive atmosphere. Obviously there were rivalries; there was jostling for position and so on, but my husband and I were kind of junior members. We had a chance to look and learn as opposed to being actively involved in some of the sillier rivalries that were going on. And they were sort of power plays in their own way, but really in a very small way.

Q: Why don't we now talk a bit about the art milieu as you saw it in its different forms. Maybe you could discuss any sort of any concrete formula or concept lying behind it or perhaps you'd like to talk about how you saw art evolving from before Mohammed Reza Shah. Whatever you'd like to talk about in that area.

Diba: First of all, the art scene was tremendously active from this time I started coming back. I felt it was. There were two different things going on actually. One is there was a sort of pretty somnolent and underpaid, understaffed section which was the Ministry of Culture and Arts. They used Iranian-educated, Iranian-staffed, mainly older people and had a small budget compared to perhaps any other area of the government. Now this encompassed Iran's one museum really, the Archaeological Museum, the Iran Bastan. Then there was the Muze-e-Mardom-Shenasi, the sociological museum which was on the grounds of the Golestan Palace. The Golestan Palace Museum with the Golestan Palace Library, and the Museum of Decorative Arts in Teheran. These are

really the main, sort of visible activities of the Ministry of Culture and Arts. It was pretty moribund coming from the West and having worked at the Metropolitan and having seen the exhibition techniques, the conservation, the cataloging -- everything was fresh in my mind. I was kind of shocked at the state of things in Iran's museums because they were really very neglected.

The museums had been set up in the 1930's by the French Archaeological Service. And even though I'm not the person really who's very knowledgeable because I simply wasn't on the scene, [it seems] there were three or four very influential, sort of elder statesmen in the arts who must have been involved in setting up the Archaeological Service with Godard and Girschman and these were all sort of old fashioned French archaeologists. Then there were Iranian scholars and there were Iranian-trained people who worked in the museum, but they were very understaffed. So this was the situation.

Aside from that you had quite a few galleries. I thought of them as pretty active. One was Goli Moqtader's Gallery; another one was -- I don't remember all the different ones. A lot of them mushroomed when I was there. There were lots of different artists working. I thought the contemporary art scene was very lively and it was encouraged quite a bit when I first got there. So that was the way I saw things when we got there, that there really was a vacuum to be filled and museums needed.

Another thing that we had in Iran was a crafts movement, but

this is something that artisans and craftsmenship had been revived under Reza Shah. And this is an important part of what was being done in the Ministry of Culture and Arts. In other words, the traditional crafts such as textiles, lacquer work, Monabatkari, Gachkari, all of these things had been encouraged and revived within say this period of 1925 to 1960 and had been centralized in Teheran. So this was another major and very positive thing I feel that the Ministry was doing at the time. It was also responsible in part for a great deal of faking that was going on, because all these people were teaching their crafts and keeping them alive and at the same time they were making forgeries.

So there were sort of different levels: I would say there was the museums run on a very old line and on a very tight budget. There was the Archaeological Service which was responsible for the digs that went on, and this was run by a man called Firuz Baqerzadeh, who was also head of the Iran Bastan Museum. It was really a one-man show, and a tremendous amount of work to do and no staff to do it. Then on another level there was the contemporary artist, the modern artists who were working. A lot of them were working and I'd say either exhibited in private galleries or the Iran-American society, and other foreign cultural societies. They were very active in supporting artists and having exhibitions. Then there were a few other galleries whose names I just don't --

Q: Seyhun Gallery?

Diba: Seyhun Gallery.

Q: You are talking about when you first came back?

Diba: When I first came back in 1973, because after that the Zand Gallery opened and the Saman opened, and there were more.

Q: It was starting to mushroom as you said.

Diba: Yes. So this was pretty much what I saw when I got there. There were tremendous possibilities for research in Iran that weren't being exploited, and in my field I would look at the Golestan Palace Library which was really being run like a fortress, partly because there has always been a history of -- well, there's no other word for it -- thievery out of royal collections, particularly manuscripts. And whether you're talking about Turkey or Iran this has been a very strong point. So that when I got to Iran, the lady that was running the Golestan Palace Library was Mrs. Badri Atabai and it was simply closed; there was nothing coming in and there was nothing going out. And this was the country's greatest resource in terms of art and for studies of any kind whether you want to talk about the Qajar period or earlier. And simply nothing was being done about it. It looked as if nothing would ever be able to be done

about it. And it was one of those circumstances where I think, because of all the pilfering that had gone on previously or because it was a politically sensitive position, it was just closed. And it came directly under the King; it was directly administered through his office. It didn't have anything to do with the Ministry of Culture and Arts or the Queen's office or anything. It was kind of like the Shrine of Imam Reza. It was one of these sacrosanct institutions, an institution that was more like a fortress than a learning institution.

But there were many possibilities. There were private collections, private archives. There was lots of architecture left in Iran. There were all sorts of possibilities if you wanted to do research. The possibilities were endless, but in reality you couldn't get at them. But there was always hope!

[end of side one of tape one]

But before I go into sort of a chronological recitation of what I did, you have to address the question of over all arts planning in Iran, because in a sense it's a reflection of the whole society and of everything that was being done there from the White Revolution onwards, I think. It was kind of microcosm. There were tremendous aspirations; there was tremendous enthusiasm and tremendous conflicts.

And the conflicts arose out of fragmentations of power in the sense that the traditional Iranian artistic scene was run by

Mehrdad Pahlbod, who was Princess Shams' husband and Minister in perpetuum of Arts and Culture. I mean I think he was the longest-running minister we had; through every single government [laughs] this kept on. So there was a certain continuity there, but it was very old fashioned.

Q: Stagnant.

Diba: Yes, stagnant. There was a stagnation there exactly. And on the other hand at some point it was decided that the Queen could be allowed to really function positively in the art scene which meant that all of a sudden a new player came into the game with all the power she had behind her. O.K. It meant that she had unlimited funds -- well, no power was ever unlimited in Iran except for the King's power. But still compared to anyone else in the country she could work miracles; she could move mountains if she wanted. So there was bound to be a tremendous clash; there was bound to be jealousy; there was bound to be conflicts; there was bound to be dislocation and secrecy. I imagine there was a great deal of secrecy.

Now, all of this affected one's sense of whether there was any planning. There was never any announcement of, "We are going to do this in the next five years." It just sort of happened. It happened bit by bit, and I think the one organization in Iran that was organized, that you really felt was modern and supportive and so on, was television. And in the course of the

few years that the museums got set up, it was only finally when all the museums were put under the <u>Boniyad</u> or her majesty's foundation -- when this was set up, legally set up, that I felt that we had a direction, that we knew where we were going.

Q: When was that? What year was that set up?

Diba: That was just at the very end. That must have been '77, late '76 and '77. And there it was that things finally came together. But until that moment in time I think one of the things was there was no real high-powered person with the Queen to help her make an overall policy. Her chef du cabinet was just that; he was a chef du cabinet. He wasn't a minister; he wasn't a planner. He was not that. And this had to do with politics. He was put there for a certain reason.

Q: By whom?

Diba: I don't know.

Q: Who was he? Was he Hoveyda's man?

Diba: I don't know. I think so. And this all had to do with the position of her chef du cabinet was a very politically important position if you think of the equivalent of King's man was Moᶜiniyan. So it was a very sensitive position that wanted

to be filled by a certain kind of person, not necessarily a person really qualified to do artistic planning. He had to fulfill other functions.

Q: But why wasn't he chosen by the Queen herself?

Diba: Well, I think he was, you know; but like anything else, I mean, there were other influences at work. She was put in a position where she chose a certain person. There were a lot of machinations in the sixties and early seventies around this particular office as to who should hold it, because it meant a lot to many different people. And there were a lot of machinations in the Diba family. And they got ousted. This all happened before I went back to Iran, and these people didn't talk about it very much. That is not to say that anyone of the Dibas would have been a better art planner than Karim Pasha Bahadori, but that he was there for political reasons. But this was true for so much in Iran.

So in a sense it wasn't until we got to having a foundation, a Boniyad where the museum policy and the arts policy got dragged out of court politics and put on a national level, and there finally started doing some planning. You could get a sense of cohesiveness. The museums got a structure. I mean it was wonderful! It was like going from night to day, and I'll talk about it when I do talk about the changes and so on.

But the only thing I can say is that when I first went back

to Iran, I had my first interview with the Queen. It was three quarters of an hour which I never had again with her, where we talked about what she wanted to create. And you talk about people getting inspired -- I got inspired! I had been working in America and all of a sudden I met this incredibly charming, articulate, still idealistic person who wanted me to work for her and who wanted me to help her fulfill a dream. It was in those terms that I came back in tears -- whatever. I felt I was walking on air, because here was someone I could work for, someone that was just totally -- if you can believe it -- different from every petty bureaucrat, every administrator. This was someone that really had a dream, and she wanted people to help her realize it.

Q: Did you feel this way about her all the way up until the end?

Diba: You can't hero-worship your way through life, but I believe that the dreams are always there even until the end. But as I stayed there I had to see the realities of what she was working with. I never had any doubt about her sincerity and her aspirations; they were always there. But reality was always there putting its spokes in the wheels -- and there were always, as I said, jealousies and conflicts and ambitions.

Everything was a subject for this. You couldn't have a pure artistic programming. You couldn't have a pure museum. People are people, and one shouldn't be surprised that it happened in

the arts field as much as anywhere else.

Q: I suppose one is surprised.

Diba: One is surprised, because everyone that's ever become an art major or wanted to have anything to do with this, always thinks it's intrinsically valuable and that there are no politics in it or that there are no machinations. But there are, obviously.

Q: but perhaps that is for another reason, Leyla. Is it possible that the Queen, the role that she was able to cut out for herself, the person that she became, the importance that she took on, was probably never expected. And therefore her office became a political entity.

Diba: Yes. You see that for me is very ironic because I'm not a politician and I was very young and very naive. To me everything was just art; I couldn't understand. But I think you're right. In Iran everything was a power base; everything was a source of power or a possibility of power. So, as you say, it did start to get more and more influential. I suppose when it got to the point that it was part of the national budget, that's when it started really -- but it was before that. There was always this political angle to it, this power angle to it, which I really didn't understand. I couldn't relate to it. In a sense I'm a

technocrat. And I just had my job and what I wanted to do. Actually I was very lucky because I was allowed to do it. Very few people interfered with me, because it was not important really.

Q: Because no one knew that particular business the way you knew it. Your field was --

Diba: There were people who felt I wasn't qualified for it. I found that out. Yes, there were people who felt that because I was not Iranian-educated or because I was not a man or because I was not over fifty or because I hadn't put twenty years of work into it -- why should I have been put in charge of this museum.

Q: Were these people qualified to hold that position?

Diba: They would have been qualified in a world twenty, forty years ago. This is again the disjuncture we had in Iran. You had young people, Western-educated who were superficially qualified for the job, who looked good. And then you had an older generation of scholars who had a tremendous amount of knowledge that could have been tapped but they didn't have the formal Western education to enable them to be able to administer things. No matter how naive I was, I was probably a better administrator than any of these guys could have been, because they just didn't have the building blocks to work within a

Western concept; "museum" was a Western notion.

And the museums such as they were in Iran before the Queen came along were simply repositories of art objects, and what had happened was that Iran as in everything else, lagged behind the rest of the world in its idea of how museums developed. Museums had changed a great deal in Europe since the 1930's, and there were a group of us who came back knowing this, having worked in them or studied there. We were young; we were ambitious; we were qualified in a Western sense.

But what was happening in my museum by the time the revolution happened - I was given the opportunity to work with some of these old guys. I had a Board of Trustees. I was thrilled to death with my Board of Trustees.

Q: Who?

Diba: I had Manuchehr Sani^{c}i. He was a court official who had been collecting objets d'art for years and he had all the connections at the Golestan Palace. He knew all the late nineteenth century painters. He was a man who had always been enthusiastic about his. I'd never met anybody so supportive; he started lending things to the museum. I had Khan Baba Bayani, who had actually, I found out later that he was a writer; he had a collection himself. I found out recently he had written a Ph.D. in Paris on Persian Diplomatic Relations in the South. Let's see, who else was on the Board? Those are the two I

remember. Also Sa[c]id Kuros and Mohandes Sadeq, the collectors. Anyway, I had a very good group, and it was towards the end, as I said, that things started gelling -- just as everything was falling apart -- for the museums. And for the art policy, things started gelling because it took years to organize it. I think it took years maybe to take it out of the political squabble or the political nether, nether-land it was in when the museums were being formed.

And finally when they got to the stage where the Boniyad were not directly under the Queen any more, in a sense it was the best thing that could have happened to us. All of a sudden we went over to sort of Reza Qotbi and it was unique. It was the beginning of something that should have happened many, many years before the idea of the Queen's foundation, because I think we were taken away from politics and we were put in with a modern institution, with people you could talk to, with budgets. It took time; everything in Iran took time.

Q: It was new to the twentieth century.

Diba: We keep talking about politics, and I realize there was a lot involved with it, but I was so busy doing my job that I realized that there were always undercurrents going on, and sometimes one of the waves would come and knock me flat, and I wouldn't know why. It was because of all this background.

You know, what you said about how people thought, "Well, the

Queen will deal with the arts and that will be her domain," and maybe the arts all of a sudden took on a great importance, because the money started going into it. But then it became --

Q: But also because the Queen is the Regent, don't forget. She was an important person. She had cut out a specific role.

Diba: Though what's strange is, really when I think in terms of money or power base, art is the last thing I think of. Let's face it. In terms of the national budget this was ludicrous! I mean, how much could have been spent on those museums compared to one nuclear plant, for God sakes! I just think it's been kind of blown out of proportion, because I don't think that the art scene was important at all. In terms of national goals, in terms of Rastakhiz [the political party established in 1975] or Ansari [Minister of Finance] or you know, all the incredible things that were happening, I saw it as a very small world.

Q: Do you have any idea how the public, and I don't mean the public being our particular society, but how the public in general viewed this boom in the arts? Did you have people coming to your museum? Was it publicized?

Diba: [Sighs] The public. I got an education as we went along in the sense that these were not to begin-with "public institutions." There was no such thing as a museum-going public

in Iran. My museum, and I can't speak for the others, so let me just talk about that, started out as a sort of little jewel in the crown, if you like; but they got an administrator (me!) who wanted to make more of it. And they had people in the Daftar-e Makhsus mainly Shirvanlu who had the idea of a cultural center. And this was an absolutely vital thing that happened in the years that I was there, because, between him and me and other people I suppose, we started talking about what museums have to be. They don't just have to be places for paintings. They have to have some sort of social relevance which is why there were conflicts from the day the museum was first built. The museum was designed by this Czechoslovakian doctor, Dr. Fritch!, who designed pavilions, Iranian pavilions at world fairs. And he was in his own way a genius, but he was not a "museoloque." And he was in charge of the Negarestan. So we had to work our way between our aspirations and what this man wanted to make which was a sort of show and tell gallery. I was saying, "No! I need to have the exhibition space! I need room for curators. I need room for cataloguing." We had to somehow make a cohesive element out of this because the people that were working, the younger people all felt that the museums had to have a function.

But as I said this was a new notion. This was not a notion that was easy to handle. In a sense my museum started out as a protocol, as an extension of the Ministry of Court, but because we fought for temporary galleries, exhibition space -- Shirvanlu was amazing, what he did to get the idea of a cultural center

going, even if it was just to have a restaurant in the place. We fought for these things.

How the public viewed it -- what I'll tell you is that attendance was limited either to Westernized Iranians and tourists or school groups. I made a special point of having masses of kids coming through the museum, as I was in the position of sensing that there was not much relevance between this museum and the people I wanted to reach, as I looked at my public -- because we were doing everything for the first time. Nobody ever went to the archaeological museum, don't forget. Nobody went except the archaeologists!

So here you had a museum that wasn't an archaeological museum and we had to serve somebody. As we went along we started seeing, reality -- it was an experiment. O.K. And I saw what was my public: either very educated Iranians or very educated foreigners or very under-educated Iranian schoolchildren, very little of what I would call the middle class or students. These are the people I would have wanted to reach. I felt all along that there was some barrier between me and the university. Obviously it was there, I just didn't understand why it was, but it was very strongly there.

Q: Do you know why now?

Diba: Oh, yes, because I was viewed as a political tool and the universities were leftists. I mean they were getting more and

more leftist. These were things that were starting to dawn on me [laughs] towards the end. But the first few years I couldn't understand why I would meet with a blank wall sometimes when I would try and get through to this. I was kind of working in a vacuum at the beginning and trying to make something out of this museum and trying to make it relevant.

The day the museum became relevant -- I started understanding this after about my third exhibition. I also saw strange people coming in that gave me hope, <u>chadori</u> women, young girls -- I mean they came, but really in dribbles and drabs, because one of the problems was the museum looked like a <u>Kakh</u>. It still looked like a palace; it was in a palace ground. People didn't even know this was open. We put big signs out saying, "Come in," but they didn't come. It was not --

Q: They were uncomfortable going there?

Diba: Yes. Well, first of all I had imperial guards as guards. Believe me! Two-ton imperial guards! [laughter] This was not terribly conducive to feeling like "this was your home, come on in." But there were a lot of things involved. As I said, after about two years of running it, looking at the people, seeing the reaction to the shows -- I did one very curatorial show on Persian Wedding Contracts. It was a very specialized show; it was perhaps the best show I did there. It was a good catalogue. [There was] very little relevance to people; it was aimed at an

educated public. Then I did a few shows that i had to do because of the overall national cultural policy. I did a show of Roloff Beny posters. I did an English silver show that nobody showed up to. It was as if they boycotted the museum. They hated that whole English festival in 1975. I felt it; I felt it in the air.

I had one piece of luck. I got an Iranian called Dr. Hazave'i. He was a real Iranian; he wasn't a semi-literate, semi-educated, Westernized kid like me. He was a man in his forties from the people who had a Ph.D. in art education. I don't know how I got this man, but he came to work for me.

Q: From the Iranian university.

Diba: No, no. From an American university. Many Iranians study in America. And he came to work for me, and we set up a studio downstairs. I'd been looking for someone to do art education for me, because I realized that I was going to have to do everything, that this museum was such a novel concept that we were just going to have to work our way, that we were going to try and see how we could reach out to people, how we could bring them in.

First we had to close the restaurant. The restaurant was just a total disaster. People couldn't conceive of the idea of coming down to Khiyaban-e Kakh to go in to a museum to have coffee and tea in the restaurant. [laughs] That was a disaster, and we didn't have the ventilation. I mean this was one of those typical stories of things that happened. Anyway, so the first