

was again, here was the influence of being in the Foundation. Once you got into the Foundation you were on a level that you could be taken seriously by the intellectuals and the major movers in Iran. You were no longer just an employee of the Special Bureau. In a sense it was almost an onus that you were an employee of the Special Bureau. Here you now had access and cooperations from all the major figures who were involved in television. This was very important.

And Karim Emami believed in this project. It was a major project because it involved many articles. We had articles on Turkaman history by Hafez Farmanfarmaiyan, who was an important scholar of Qajar history who had not been used in Iran by anybody for years. We had Veronica Gerrers; we had Suren Malikiyan; we had a vast array of scholars who were working on a catalogue and all of this had been translated very well into Farsi. I don't remember who did the translating for us, and this was sort of Karim Emami's baby. He was very excited about it. It was an example of what could be done. Coming down to the line we finished it in November, 1978. And we sat there and the thing was finished, in his office and I stood by the window and finally broke down and cried because it was the end and we couldn't open the exhibition and we'd done all this work and he had given everything; he had put his entire staff onto doing this major -- it was a huge catalogue, hundreds of pages, color printed, everything -- and really it was going to be the first major work in any language on Turkaman art, textiles, jewelry, everything.

And it wouldn't have been possible without the collectors.

Major sources were Monir and Abol-Bashar Farmanfarmaiyan, Rahim and George Anaviyan. There was a group of rug collectors in Iran who also were very helpful. I actually had the cooperation to get on television. We went to the tribes themselves and got things from their own hope chests and private collections that they were just dying to give us because they were so proud of the fact that this was going to be the Negarestan that they were going to be invited. All these Turkamans were going to come. It was a cultural happening in a sense if it had happened. We just kept working and working on it until finally it was the end of November, 1978, and we were due to open it. But it was Moharram. It was just impossible.

Q: You didn't feel any sort of -- that it wouldn't be appropriate --

Diba: You did and you didn't! Life went on; you kept thinking to yourself -- I remember having conversations with friends about, "Feels like the Russian Revolution," or "It feels like the French Revolution," and there were warning signs and there was a military government. But your life went on. There was nothing to do except to continue your work; this was the only thing you could do. There was no revolution; if there was no revolution, there was not going to be any reaction to the revolution; there was not going to be any fighting in the revolution -- do you

understand? So you just kept on doing your job. The museum closed down more and more, and finally you had to face the reality that something major was happening. And this was not until November '78. There were other signs for me that aren't relevant right now to what we're talking about. But in terms of the catalogue, it was just a tremendous effort that we'd all put into it and this feeling of tremendous camaraderie with Karim Emami that he literally had given everything he'd had to putting this in and I had given everything I'd had and Barbara had given everything, because we just kept hoping maybe we could get it done, maybe we can finish it. And it was kind of gallantry under fire on Karim Emami's part, because he was working with people who just weren't working anymore.

You know, there had been a total stoppage in terms of the ministries, in terms of customs. The fact that these people still worked for him showed, just as I had seen many times in Iran, this incredible energy and gallantry and ambition, aspiration to do something more. They were always being asked to do more, and sometimes they came through. This is an example of where it came through.

Q: You weren't able even to get a copy of this catalogue?

Diba: No. Never. I know they exist, that they were all printed. Everything was printed, and it was available in Soroush.

Q: Oh, they were.

Diba: They stocked it; they couldn't do anything with this. I had posters in my house, because we'd done everything. Posters, we'd done interviews; we had magazines talking about the show. So we really kept on doing our job. Basically people just keep on doing their job. But the one thing I didn't have was the catalogue in the hand. So I never actually had it. I had all the galley proofs. When I left Iran, they kept on printing it; and it was very dangerous after the revolution to try and get this because a major part of it was Monir and Abol-Bashar Farmanfarmaiyan's collection, and they were hoping to be able to save this because we took everything out of the museum and sent it back to their house. It was a hope, because they couldn't go near Soroush because it was now in charge of the Komitehs and I think Monir's brother-in-law went once and immediately they got on his case and he was asked, "Where is the collection now and what happened to it?" So we just had to drop the whole thing. There was no way of getting any of this material, which is a shame. There was a terrific amount of printing and publishing done in Iran in the sixties and seventies, a huge amount. These in one way or another were all very important contributions, and mine was one of them. Every time a museum opened, every time there was an event -- there were symposia, there were festivals, there was tremendous publishing going on. When the Negarestan opened, we opened with like five books. Every time I did an

exhibition there was tremendous incentive and encouragement particularly from Her Majesty to publish, to bring things out, to bring out catalogues and so on. And we were very, very much encouraged to do this all the time. There was a lot of printing going on in Iran. The 25 Shahrivar and Soroush, television -- everywhere people were being extremely active, maybe more active than they were capable of inputting, but it was all getting written down. I really feel strongly that somehow an archive should be set up of the books that were published, the research that was done in those years that got published. So it was very exciting in a sense because there was a tremendous amount of [this] going on.

We could talk about the transition to the Foundation. This is a major change in my life and a major change for the Negarestan. Obviously it was made easier by the fact that I knew Reza Qotbi and his wife personally. I was living opposite his wife, Shahrzad Afshar. And Reza Qotbi again was a cousin of the Queen who was in charge of television. He was an extremely powerful man on a national level. Finally having the museum associated with the institution that we considered the most advanced, with the best pay, the most cooperative, all the intellectuals working for this institution, was like a godsend for me -- finally to have cooperation of some kind. So we became part of a larger family; we became part of the planning. The Foundation itself had its own board of directors, I guess it was called, and each institution that then became part of the

Foundation had its own board of directors; and that included me. I can't remember all the different people involved, there were so many. But all the Queen's museums --

Q:

Diba: Yes, there were various cultural centers. For some reason, Ehsan Naraqi, Daryush Shaygan, these people were heading intellectual centers, study centers there were becoming part of this. I think the Festival of Shiraz was part of it. Everything was coalescing under this, and it was really a major development. I just cannot pick my brains any more about who was involved in the different categories.

Q: Did the other museums you were talking about prior to yours still remain under the influence of the Cultural Ministry, the Ministry of Culture?

Diba: The ones that were opened before the Queen's Daftar. These were two totally separate entities. It was a major step in the right direction but it took a few years to form. Probably there were things going on behind the scenes. It took a few years to formulate the policies really so that the two could co-exist peacefully, if you like. I think a major, absolutely major, influence in the Foundation was Reza Qotbi. His ideas were absolutely very important in the concept and the

implementation of Her Majesty's Foundation. All the major people in the arts were involved with this. So it was going to be a grand experiment! And in terms of myself it was going to be very important for the Negarestan as I said, to have a budget. It was not enormous but it was really very sufficient for what I was glad to have, freedom to finally buy things that I felt were proper for the Negarestan with the approval of my Board of Directors. I had a very workable Board of Directors. I think overall, the people chosen for the Board of Directors were, of all the museums, interesting. I think it was very good to see that you could actually put together a board of directors, and that people were being finally drawn into the art scene, you know what I mean? Certainly no private [citizens] had ever been brought into the art scene before, educated people who had either been collecting or had had some involvement, had never been involved in any government level project before. It was exciting to be involved in it and finally you felt, "I'm involved in the planning for the country!" That was very good, too.

The Foundation had plenty of plans. They put on a major African exhibition; you were connected with the Shiraz Festival. There were all sorts of projects that were bubbling up in that last year or so.

So everything was working together. If the Foundation was doing a Black Arts Festival, somehow it was going to relate to the Negarestan we were going to have lectures there. It was going to become --

Q: A network.

Diba: A real network. And what made it work, I think, was that all the people involved strangely knew each other. I could pick up the phone and call Nazi Diba without going through any red tape and do whatever I wanted. I could do the same with Kami Diba or Reza Qotbi or anyone there. It really was unique and exciting because of this. So in terms of the criticisms that have come of nepotism -- nepotism made it work because you could bypass the red tape; you could bypass the bureaucracy. Each one of us could talk to each other as human beings, and if you couldn't do it by phone, you'd do it at parties you'd attend. This was the way things were worked in Iran, because and in a sense it made it easier to avoid petty rivalry, somehow; I don't know why, but it was partly because, I think, the Queen's influence did not encourage petty rivalry. You did feel as if you were working for something, especially when you became part of the Boniyad. The Boniyad was a Foundation; it was not political, even though it did make a strong political statement. It had to. You didn't feel as if you were going to be involved in petty rivalries; you felt you were going to be working for a grand design. These were all sort of the feelings I had, and I don't know if reality was correspondent to them. But it was a bit utopic --

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-- in terms of the possibilities of cooperation and the lack of distrust of the people involved. You could pick up the phone and say, "Hey, I'm a member of the same club; we're trying to do the same thing. Will you help me?" which is how I put the Turkaman Exhibition together.

I had such incredible help. How I did it, I remember, I was at Nowshahr and Reza Qotbi was there, and I cornered him and said, "Reza, will you help me?" which he always wanted to. He was an amazingly positive man. All the people I was working for at this period were very positive even though the revolution was around the corner. It was very strange. It was a year before the revolution! "Please help me; I want to do a Turkaman Exhibition. I need contacts." He said, "Fine." He put together a board for me of everyone in television who had anything to do with Turkamans. I had such access it was unbelievable. He got me a specialist who was a Turkaman himself who arranged an entire trip for me to Turkaman Sahra. He had all the contacts to see all the local dances, the folklore and the music, everything. We were going to do a major festival in Iran. And thanks to being able to corner somebody like Reza Qotbi and say, "I want your help," and he would say, "I want to help you." This was happening, too. There were endless possibilities once you became part of this, working with T.M.O.C.A. or with anything with the Shiraz Arts Festival. Through the Queen's influence, I think, all of these

organizations now had a feeling of community, a sense of community and we were going to get the money to go with it.

Q: What was your budget?

Diba: You know, I don't remember. It was, I think, somewhere between three and five hundred thousand dollars.

Q: A year?

Diba: Yes. Something like that, a couple of million tomans. I really cannot remember. It was very small. Maybe it was eight million tomans. I really, really cannot remember! [laughs] It was very small compared to T.M.O.C.A. They had a huge budget, most of it for acquisitions, but they also had a huge staff. And that was another thing. The fact that T.M.O.C.A. existed and that it was made on an international level was due to Kami Diba and his experiences as an architect and his contacts in the West. He came into his job much more experienced than I did and more powerfully than I did. So from the time that the T.M.O.C.A. existed -- the carpet museum, no, because Nazi didn't have that kind of influence. I don't mean personal influence; I mean she simply didn't have the kind of background and training that Kami already did.

Q: What was Kami's training and background?

Diba: Well, he was an American-trained architect and painter who had been working at his trade for at least ten or fifteen years, and he was very influential. He had his own office, an architectural office. He had done major commissions in Iran, designed buildings. He was already quite an important figure when he was put in charge of T.M.O.C.A.

Q: And he designed the Museum itself.

Diba: He designed the Museum itself which I think was a very original design, a very good design. It actually worked for the people who lived in it; it was conceived as a museum so it didn't have any of the problems that we had.

Q: Wasn't it very similar to another Spanish museum?

Diba: It was, and I can't remember. What is very strange is that I was in Spain last year and I saw this building and I went, "Oh, my God!" It was so similar, but I can't remember where I saw it. But yes, it had these round --

Q: Cylinder type.

Diba: Cylinder type elements in the roof which gave it a very, very distinctive silhouette. It was an element that had been

adapted or inspired by another piece of architecture somewhere which I don't think really detracts from it at all. There are very few buildings in the world that haven't taken elements from somewhere else. But it was a building that worked. And also, as I said, it was a major project compared to the Negarestan, which was sort of a little baby that grew with time. But because there was this going on, I could ask for more things for the museum. This obviously was Peter Principle or whatever. If T.M.O.C.A. has this, we should be able to have it. If they can have these salaries, they had to allow us to raise our salaries. Once you were part of the Foundation particularly was a godsend because the salaries of television were going to be the salaries we applied to our scale. And I was very, very happy for my workers because I knew, thank God, that they would get a decent salary. So this was very, very important to the museum, for what we were going to be able to do and accomplish.

As I said, my initial contacts were directly with Reza Qotbi and Haleh Esfandiyari, who was his assistant. Then about six months or a year into the Foundation -- there were a lot of changes as you remember in the last year in Iran -- on the governmental level. A lot of ministers were removed, and Hoveyda was particularly switched from Prime Minister to Minister of Court, and in the process also, Majidi resigned or was asked to. So what happened was the Foundation which originally was directly under Reza Qotbi's influence and you almost thought it was almost small. I mean you knew it was going to get a lot bigger. But

they worked out of -- there was this wonderful building that they completely remodeled, oh, I can't remember it. On the old Shemiran Road. Maybe the name will come back to me. It was an incredible Qajar building that belonged to a famous Qajar prince and general (Baq Ferdows-Sepahsalar's building). I cannot remember his name. It had amazing gachkari -- carved plasterwork, and all of this had been remodeled and redone to serve as the center for the Foundation. And this is where it first worked out of; and that's also where they had the African exhibition which was a kind of kick off for the Foundation. In any case, the Foundation originally was supposed to have been run by Reza Qotbi. Then, I think, when the political scene shifted, Mr. Majidi was put in charge of it. So at the very beginning I worked with Reza and Haleh and then with Majidi.

There was a great deal of autonomy. I don't recall ever being given directives. I recall that you were working within a framework which you agreed with totally. From the beginning you had been mapped out because you were going to have a permanent collection, you were going to have cultural activities, you were going to have acquisitions. And as time went on all these things did fall into place. Your only limit was how much money you had to accomplish these things. And none of this changed when you became part of the Foundation. But everything became much, much better, you had a lot more people to turn to, and from that point on the budget was going to be part of the national budget. I actually had a possibility of planning, of saying, I need this

and I need that and I have this many workers and I'll need this many next year and their salaries have to be this and I'm going to have three exhibitions. It was finally getting on a professional level there. So this was very important in terms of what could be done.

And then my financial contacts were no longer with the Special Bureau but with television, because they were supplying the financial administration of the Foundation. And as the Foundation developed, people were being taken from T.V., particularly the accountant of T.V. whose name I forget, but he was a very, very competent man. He was very understanding. My God, after years of working with the Special Bureau where everything was nickel and dime -- it was run very much on that kind of a basis; you know, very low salaries. Everything hush-hush. It was very difficult to work in that atmosphere. The foundation was something totally different; you had people who understood about money, salaries, and how people had to live, and what you needed to spend. So it was very, very refreshing to find his kind of atmosphere. So I worked with the accountant. And this is where things stood when the revolution happened.

Now the last thing that I would say is that I finally had my own budget; I had my own Board of Directors and we met maybe two or three times before the revolution came. I particularly proposed one thing I wanted which was an English watercolor that was in a sale in London that was a copy of the original paintings that filled the three walls of the original Negarestan Museum

which the museum was named after, the Palace of the period of Fath-^CAli Shah. So I fought very hard and long to get this, and convinced people that I wanted it. We also got some gifts which I no longer remember; they were not very important.

But the last thing that was very important was there was a sale in London in October, '78, and there was a painting by Abdollah Khan, who was the original painter of the Negarestan murals which were gone. It was a painting of Prince ^CAbbas Mirza, who was Fath-^CAli Shah's son and heir. It was a major, absolutely guaranteed provenance, example of Qajar painting. I wanted it for the museum. I got the approval of everyone concerned and I went to London. I had a gentleman bidding on this for me who was an Iranian living in London who was a former Minister of Culture and Arts in Iran, and I cannot remember his name. It might come back to me eventually. So I did this in secrecy; I didn't want anyone to know I was bidding on this painting. So he bid on it for me; he got it. One of the great tragedies of the revolution was -- this was in October of '78; I went back to Iran; I saw the situation was very bad, particularly because the customs was closed. Nothing could come into the country. I contacted a few people that I knew and asked them, "Could they be of any help to me; that I'd bought this painting in London. Could I get it to Iran?" And there was a moment in which everything was getting to a standstill. Literally! I think I even went and asked the Queen, and it was just not going to be possible. So the painting was in London, and I told the

man not to send it until I knew how we were going to get it out of the customs. And he for reasons of his own decided to send it; and sure enough it fell right into the revolution and it's disappeared.

Q: You know it's disappeared.

Diba: I know it was never taken out of customs...

[tape forwarded]

Q: Leyla, let's talk a little about the Teheran Museum of Contemporary Art (T.M.O.C.A.). How did it get started? Who was running it? Tell me in your own words.

Diba: The idea of a museum of modern art was part of a dream that went back to the years with the Queen, from the time that she was first an architecture student; and then she came back to Iran and was collecting herself and was involved and it was a certain part of her image to eventually make a museum like this. Don't forget it would not have been the first museum of modern art as such to exist. India had a museum of modern art and modern architecture. It hadn't had a museum of modern art, but there were museums in which there was modern art even though I think it was modern Indian art. So in one sense it was not going to be without precedent and in another sense it was going to be

unique.

But I think Iran was in a very unique sociological and financial position, and we were trying to get into the twenty-first century in a minimum amount of time. At the time it seemed to be something that we needed to complete our artistic education. I think the main idea of having a museum of modern art was that we had many artists; we wanted them to prosper. We wanted them to have available a source of visual images that would help them to formulate a higher quality of art than what they had been doing, so that they didn't have to go to Europe to get an education. And whoever went to Europe only got the education of that country, the visual education. We had artists who were formed mainly in France or Italy and most of them represented a kind of old-fashioned approach that was current, say, in the fifties and sixties, a very -- what would be the word? -- pictographic or ideographic approach. Either that or they came back as almost academics. They didn't come back as surrealist painters or as really having been able to speak themselves in the current, contemporary artistic language. This is what you need to form a really superior, if you like, modern artist.

Let me give you some of the ideas that were in back of why one would want a museum of modern art. And then because there were obviously all these problems in planning in Iran; then there were all these problems in people's different priorities. Partly, as I mentioned, there had been plans for the creation of

a museum of modern art in Shiraz and all the Maquettes in the whole system had been planned by Alvar Alto. They had all this stuff that had already been commissioned, and the person who was particularly pushing this was Manuchehr Iranpur. For some reason the museum of modern art became the Museum of Contemporary Art. What all the reasonings behind this were, I don't know; but one of the givens was perhaps the idea that eventually the collections might be divided into contemporary and modern. But well, as long as we had a museum, let's put everything there. And of course, in Iran also, the quality of project depended on the person who became immediately involved with it.

I don't know if Kamran Diba had been slated as the director of this museum from day one. I never got that impression, but then, of course, I was never told that I was director of the museum until the day, literally, the museum was opened and I was [told], "Congratulations! [laughs] This is now your job." This was the way things were done in Iran. You were not given tremendous advance notice about who was going to be running a given institution. So it was a project that was conceived in the Special Bureau by non-specialists, if you like, with various inputs from many different people. In terms of the collection, it was what the Queen had been buying here and there from various sources, at least I would say about two years: a lot from the Gallery Maeght, various private sources, from particularly this Mr. Vakili in the Vatican who was an art expert. I never met him, but he was sort of the contact and then Donna Stein as the

contact. So part of a collection was already built up.

The modern Iranian works of art that were part of the selection -- I don't know who was responsible for their choosing. I also forgot to mention that Fereshteh Daftari was very much involved with all of this until about a year before the museum opened, at which point she left the Special Bureau and went to work for Ardeshir Mohasses at one of the universities. I forget which university it was. I can't remember the name. So she left the project, I would say about a year before the museum opened.

Q: Why did she leave the project?

Diba: I think it was for personal reasons. I never understood. She had the chance to be curator, but I think she wasn't ready for perhaps the in-fighting or the realities of what it meant to run an institution or to have to fight for the job, because it was basically a position many people wanted or would have wanted and felt qualified for. And she could have had it, but she didn't want it. She left and she went to teach. This was her choice. She could have had it.

About the same time she was leaving that was when Kamran was actually put in charge of opening the museum. I didn't think he was called director from day one. This is the way things were done. You were not given a position from day one. You were put in charge of, you were manager, you were what-not; you could farm out the work. And that was how the museum opened basically.

Kamran put together a staff of foreign experts mainly. He had a few Iranians, but I'm talking about the absolute top level of the management: Galloway, Robert Hobbs, Donna Stein. I think he had input also from other sources. Kami himself had a lot of connections with say, German collectors. I particularly remember someone called Ludwig who had huge collections mainly of contemporary art. There were relations there. Also, Kami bought art directly himself from New York for the collection via Tony Shafrazi mainly who was the agent in between. So the collection was very varied. Many people put different levels of input into it.

The actual installation and catalogue and opening was, I think, mainly collaboration of Kamran and of Galloway. Oh, I've forgotten Nasrin Faqih. Now they had a department there. I don't know if it was architectural drawings, something, because her field was architecture. There were a lot of shows they put on at the Museum of Contemporary Art besides the opening of the museum. I particularly remember she did a show of the Reza Shah period of architecture, drawings, which was fascinating because it was this 1930's, 1940's Mussolini type architecture which was current in Turkey and in Iran. It was fascinating to see drawings of buildings that either didn't exist or might not exist in ten or fifteen years. So she was active there for a while, but she was a very difficult personality and sort of intrigued herself out of a job because she was a very, very intriguing kind of person.

I don't remember exactly what year T.M.O.C.A. opened. Was it opened for more than --

Q: Not more than three years.

Diba: Oh, much less. It was either two years or a year and a half approximately, because it was the last museum to open. I always sort of date things by the Festival of Islam. That was '76, and by December, '78, that was the revolution. So maximum two years; probably a year and a half. I don't remember exactly. If I really tried, I suppose I could remember exactly what it was. It definitely opened with Kamran as director and these certain people there. But within a year, a year and a half, Galloway, Hobbs, Stein -- all these people had left.

Q: For what reasons?

Diba: I don't know; there were obviously conflicts. I think it was very difficult for foreigners to work in Iran. They always met a lot of pressure and a lot of difficulty in trying to work with an Iranian staff. Also, the museum opened with a big bang and a huge budget! I think that then by the next year there were a lot of financial problems already. By the second year they just couldn't keep up that standard.

First of all it was absolutely beautifully designed! It was one of the most impressive things I'd seen in Iran as I knew

museums. As I'd explained earlier, T.M.O.C.A. was unique because it was one whole concept. It was one project where one man was able to fulfill in a sense his vision of beginning to end with the minimum amount of compromises, which is not true for all the other museums. [laughs] There were always fifty hands in the pot. Here it was Kamran's concept of the museum. And even though the collections were not completely formed by him, as I said there were quite a few things that had been bought that came from various sources; there were probably donations. I don't remember who chose the Iranian works of art that were going to be there; that I don't remember because I was already at the Negarestan by then and I don't remember how they bought from Iranian artists.

Q: I think Kamran was responsible for that, and one wonders to what extent he was qualified. Also, there was a lot of emphasis put on the buying of foreign art, and for the Iranian artists he didn't feel like he needed any help. Whereas for the foreign art, he had ten different consultants which was a big mistake.

Diba: I don't know. As I said, I do not know who bought the Iranian art. With the Iranian art, part of it [was] of course, he was an artist himself and he knew the other artists. But that also meant that he would have his favorites; it also meant that he would have to have a certain bias in which art he thought was -- it was inevitable that he would have a certain bias in terms

of which art he thought was museum-worthy. I myself know that coming from a relatively contemporary Western formation of Kamran's when I came to Iran there were certain artistic styles that were definitely yesterday, and they were yesterday. I mean, someone like Ardeshir Mohasses was definitely yesterday. I don't know if I got the first name right. In any case, it would be bound to be a little bit one-sided. So you have a lopsided collection coming into being a little bit, also a collection in which there was a lot more immediate money spent than in any one previously.

The Negarestan Collection, as I showed you, was the result of accumulation more than big amounts of money being spent. Whereas I remember the T.M.O.C.A. had a huge budget for opening. And once we were part of the Foundation, it had the heaviest budget of all the museums. But it was a place that was run the most professionally, had the largest staff at the beginning anyway. It seemed really as if it were a really major, major event for all of us. But it ran into trouble very early on.

Conflicts of ego, I think a lot; and then the possibility for intrigue. As I said, someone like Nasrin Faqih was a very talented woman, I thought; she was a very talented artist, but got involved in intrigues unbelievable in a museum. I personally remember something happening, I can't remember any more, that I somehow got involved and I was terribly shocked. It was really intrigue. So these things happened. It sort of fell apart very quickly. What all of the causes were I don't know. We did talk

about various artists feeling that they weren't properly represented or that they weren't properly supported. Maybe this would have straightened out eventually, because I feel in theory the museum had a very good board.

I was thinking about this, and I was thinking we all had a good board for what we were lacking. I, as a young Western-trained woman, had a board of elderly statesmen of Qajar art, if you like, who were extremely helpful to me. Now that was my attitude, also. I had a pretty ego-effacing attitude; whereas Kamran was a man who had already accomplished a great deal in his life; he thought of himself, and rightly so I think, as one of Iran's major architects. He also had made quite a few enemies along the line; so he was walking into the job with a lot of problems already. I knew quite a few of the people on his board; it was an interesting board because he had people like the Lajevardis; he had Mehdi Kowsar; he had Fatemeh Farmanfarmaiyan. I remember his board better than mine. [laughs] Who else did he have? He had a very talented filmmaker on his board, his name I've forgotten.

Q: Golestan?

Diba: No, it wasn't Golestan. It was another one. He had, I think, a board that would have supplemented his problems; but early on they came into a terrible clash such as I never had with mine, over finances, over a million questions, mainly finances:

the result of intrigue from the museum itself. So there were a lot of problems very early on which was a terrible shame, because everyone was very optimistic at the beginning. And really I felt that at the time of the revolution obviously Kamran Diba had to resign. He no longer had the Queen's support; he told me himself that he went to Europe and he found out that there were all these problems going on in Iran and he came back. He didn't have any choice. Eventually there was just too much opposition from his board.

Not having spoken to him myself, I wonder if he thought of this as his "baby?" You know, the building was his. Perhaps he felt, more than anyone, and he was also an architect. He was used to running his own office, having his own way. I came from a museum background; in other words, I'd worked in museums; I'd seen how they were run. I accepted the fact that Western style museum is like a corporation: you have a board of directors which you are responsible to. This is how I viewed my function. They were advising me, correct; but I was also accepting them. There has to be mutual consent on both sides for the thing to work which I don't think happened in T.M.O.C.A. There were conflicts; there were clashes; there was too much money; there were too many personalities. I stayed away from contemporary art like the plague. From the day the Negarestan opened people came to me and wanted to do exhibitions, and I just refused. I said, "My period stops in 1925," and that's it. For this very reason, because in Iran if you dealt with modern art, you had to deal

with people. And artists are extremely sensitive personalities.

[recorder off]

As I was saying, artists are very sensitive people in Iran.

I have to say that overall I considered myself a relatively aware, relatively educated -- quite well-educated in terms of modern art; after all I had quite a good background from some of the best schools in the States in terms of quality, in terms of twentieth century art. And when I came to Iran, I have to say I was very disappointed at the level of art in the country, as I think would have happened going to any, if you like, provincial area, to Paris or New York. You have to realize that twentieth century art was made not in Rome, not in London, not certainly anywhere further south, but in Paris and in Rome. This is a difficult situation because Iranian artists were simply not of an international caliber, not even when I came. I simply didn't find any level of quality. Having come from a Western formation one has certain standards, certain expectations in terms of an artist's development in terms of formal value, in terms of what he could do. And frankly most artists seemed to me to be "hacks."

There were very few people in whom I could see even a developing career. The only one I personally felt had real quality as an artist and showed a sense of development, showed perception of strong, formal values and yet having a language that came out of the country was Zenderudi, and everyone

associated with that Sagga Khaneh School at least had a sense of authenticity about it.

In terms of the art world, it's very difficult for a twentieth century artist, whether he's Moroccan or Venezuelan or an Iranian artist -- trying to find a vocabulary that really has meaning and trying to develop quality. Juan Gris was not a Spanish artist; he was a French artist. He was born in Spain. Picasso, one forgets he was Spanish! He was essentially French. And this was a problem that we faced in Iran. The East versus West is basically this dichotomy, this impossibility. And so it was a combination of a pretty mediocre art scene. One wanted it to be better; one wanted to support it and wanted to see whatever one could. But it didn't meet your expectation. And yet in terms of expectations the artists -- many of them had really inflated egos, unbelievable egos, for what they were; and part of the reason being is that many of them had not traveled in the world. They didn't know what Picasso was; they didn't know what your standards were. One tried to be nice and say "Yes," and so on. But simply it was they who could have inflated egos because they hadn't had a chance to compare themselves on an international level, to realize -- which they are doing now -- in post-revolutionary New York there are many Iranian artists who are now having to compare themselves to the top contemporary artists in the world, and now having to face the fact that they can't sell a painting, that they don't "have it."

Well, if they had been made to face that in Iran maybe we

would have had less problems. But as it was, no. One couldn't or we couldn't tell them, "Listen, you really need to go back to school," or "That's just not enough." It wasn't enough. There were really very few artists. If you wanted to use one standard: how many of these artists were represented in any museums or collections outside of Iran?

The problem is: how is an art going to get better if you don't support it! You have to start somewhere, and that was what we never had the time to do. Maybe it should have been started sooner. This was 1975 when I went back. How could we have started it sooner? Did we have the money to start it sooner? Iran was a developing country; art was a luxury; artists were a luxury. So by 1975 or 1974 huge amounts of petro-dollars coming in, yes, then we could start thinking about forming these artists and so on. But again it was too little, too late! It would have been nice if they could have formed in a more consecutive way over the previous twenty years; but that wasn't the case. They were very one-note artists; very, very one-note artists. And as I said, with expectations, because we had a system that even though it was a monarchy, it was almost a Socialist state. I remember there was a point where we were offering free milk and cookies to every child in the school system. Well, that broke us! We did it for a year and then it had to be cut out of the budget, because what developing country can afford to do that? We had Socialized medicine; we had almost a welfare state within a monarchy. And so it developed this kind of attitude, and the

other thing being since there was so little artistic patronage -- there were a lot of artists, but there weren't that many collectors -- everyone then turned to the Queen. And since this was anyway a very patriarchal society, hierarchical society, everyone looked to her for patronage. It was a kind of no-exit situation. The expectations were there; the quality wasn't there. The money was there but it was too late.

Q: Were there any programs set up to encourage the artists? Was there anything at all?

Diba: I really don't think there was much, no. I recall artists getting, by the time I was there, it stepped up a lot, scholarships. Now that I think of it, when I was in the Special Bureau, they used to get scholarships. They were sent to Venice or Vienna. Eventually there were planeloads of them that were literally taken to Europe at the Queen's expense and taken to various shows and their works were shown. It all happened in a matter of five years. I don't know what the politics behind it were. Was she finally given a red light? Was she given a huge budget? Was her money increased so that she could do more of this? Or was it decided that it was a good moment in time now to support the artists whereas it hadn't been before? Was she involved in other things before? Certainly what I can say is the Ministry of Culture and Arts did nothing for the contemporary art and modern artists in Iran before that.

The Ministry of Culture and Arts supported, very well, if I may say, the arts and crafts movement in Iran. Excellent! From the time of Reza Shah they built art high schools (Honarhay-e Ziba) where they formed artists in the traditional way. I knew people who had graduated from that, very good artists, within a very traditional vocabulary, the vocabulary of say, Khatam Kari, Roghan Kari, all these traditional Persian crafts. And from within that also a sort of debased Safavid style of miniature painting by people like Farshchian and Hosein Behzad. These are the kinds of artists that were somewhat supported by the Ministry of Culture and Arts; but everybody else -- forget it! There was no one for them to turn to. There was certainly no non-royal patronage.

I can only speak from what I remember seeing. It's possible that artists were supported in many ways before I went to Iran that I don't know about. I know certainly their art was bought; collections were bought from them. I can think of a few artists, Tanavoli for instance, Monir Farmanfarmaiyan, these were two of the artists that I know either works or collections or whatever were bought from them. That's one way of supporting the arts. But another way, the way of scholarships or sending them abroad or whatever, I know there was a certain program of this; but I think it was only a drop in the bucket.

~~The same sort of experience as I had when trying to get~~
people from museum training. Just trying to find staff to run the museums! This was one of the problems at T.M.O.C.A. Where