

do you find Iranians for the job? Wouldn't I be willing to put an Iranian in the job? Yes! But where do I find a qualified Iranian for a Western-style institution? This again was the problem. Museums were Western institutions needing Western-trained staff. We had the buildings before we had the staff; we had the buildings before we had the collections. You're trying to pull all these things together. It's hard; really hard!

There were accusations; there were problems. I remember people objected terribly to the patronage of Roloff Beny. Chocolate box art, I remember they called it. Well, was there an Iranian photographer who could do better? This is the question I have to ask. I don't know. I personally didn't know of any. Roloff Beny was a kind of slick view of Iran, but he was an amazing photographer technically and in terms of his vision, he really produced! But people I know, objected very strongly to the image because he gave a sort of pasteurized image of Iran in his books, in his Persia, Bridge of Turquoise. And I did an exhibition of his posters and pictures drawn from that and nobody came! Now maybe if I'd done the work of an Iranian photographer, they would have come, even if it was mediocre! Again, this is it; you get down to it -- yes, there were Iranians who could have been used, but most of them were mediocre. Could they have done better? Yes, with support. Was the support there? It was coming. Yes. So that's the problem over and over again.

Q: O.K., now that we've talked about all the museums, maybe

you'd like to sort of recap in the sense of, describe how you feel this whole art scene fit into the society and the political situation.

Diba: I should mention that there were a series of articles written after the revolution in Art in America, three, about the whole museum and art scene in Iran. And in that article, it said, well, the building of museums was just part of Pahlavi propaganda. And that there was no point in the museums at all except to impress foreign visitors and foreign press and nobody was interested in local perception. That's ridiculous. True, our leaders and our elite were concerned with the West, but sometimes we even unnecessarily felt very superior to the West. But to say that this was the end-all and the be-all of the program is ridiculous.

Museums were part of a larger scene. They were part of the sense of using Iranian culture as a means for binding the country together. It was part of a sense of patriotism and a sense of nationalism that the Pahlavis were trying to foster, and a sense of unity. It didn't have anything to do with Islam. As a matter of fact, I think it was almost contrary. It was part of an overall program of trying to educate and modernize this country. I think it was an attempt to fill an emotional and philosophical void that had been left by religion. From the time Reza Shah had come in and he had set himself up the Mollahs and he had taken away the veil and he had secularized Iranian society, I think

Iran was a country in search of something to fill that void. And in a sense art and culture were elected. And it was a failure that it didn't meet the people's needs -- it was part of a various series of things. If you were to talk to someone in the planning organization, if you were to talk to someone in television, each person would perhaps say, "My [thing] was part of an attempt to give people a sense of unity, to create an Iran and nationalism."

I think it was very much a part of a sense of wanting to create a firm basis for the government and for the dynasty. Pahlavi is a Persian name; the language of the Sasanids. So it was a deliberate attempt, it was a period in time when we were saying, "We don't need Islam any more; we don't need the Mollahs any more; we don't want them any more. They belong to the Middle Ages." So anything that emphasized Iranian history, Iranian culture, was part of this. And I have to see arts and the patronage thereof including the Shiraz Festival which began with such wonderful intentions and ended in such a terrible fiasco.

Not just that; there were all kinds of things. There were folklore festivals. Again, there were folklore festivals organized by Farrokh Ghaffari, who was one of the leading intellectuals and advisors of the Queen, who was responsible for the Shiraz Festival.

Shiraz was something that backfired. There were other festivals, other emphases on local culture, local pride, tribal customs -- this kind of thing, that though they were all part of

a program that had a political sense, if you like --

[end of side one of tape three]

Q: Leyla, to what extent was the Queen involved in museum policy making?

Diba: Well, it couldn't have existed without her obviously. The initial ideas for the museum -- she had advisors, but the whole idea, the whole planning had come from her. She had obviously input from various European groups, also. I think it would in the final result be a combination of, in terms of the entire museum policy which means how the museums were going to be run, the whole aspect of them which I already talked about, the notion of a modern, Western museum had to come from the West -- and I think it was a combination of experts from I.C.O.M. and the Metropolitan particularly; various individuals' input such as Bahadori and I think, also, a lot of influence from Reza Qotbi. He had already set up a similar mechanism if you think of television. It was the most advanced and the most supportive organization in Iran, the most modern-thinking. It found a place for homeless intellectuals which probably also would have happened with us eventually if it continued for better or worse.

So I think a lot of the input, certainly in terms of making the Foundation, the rules of the Foundation; that was Reza Qotbi's baby, and how the museums fit into that. And I think the

policy just developed, a combination of all these different things and finally coming together with the idea of the Foundation, finally Her Majesty's Foundation. It was the idea that we would finally have a board of directors and budgets and that. That I think went hand in hand with the development of the Foundation and the idea of setting up an entity, a non-profit entity, which is what a museum was. It was a pretty radical notion for Iran. We had governments and we had private businesses with non-profit institutions that were going to be run by individuals and not by members of the royal family which we were only by proxy or by marriage as it turns out [laughter]; it really was going to be new, there were social organizations but they were headed by Mrs. Diba or Princess Ashraf or something. I would say she was directly involved in the entire set-up.

Q: And how often did you consult her and on what subjects basically?

Diba: Very little. I think my original "vetting" happened when I first came to Iran and I had my serious conversation with her. Once she had made up her mind that you were going to do the job, that was it! I would consult with her if she came to the museum. She had a habit of dropping by before, which was very reassuring in a way because you knew someone was there. Two times I think she came before we were opening an exhibition just to make sure and if you needed something. I mean, she was always there if you

did need something very simply like there are no lights outside or the trash cans need painting. Something as ludicrous as that she would be thinking of. I guess that she had learned that you had to worry about these kinds of details. She would have that kind of a personal involvement.

Q: She was helpful on all levels you found always.

Diba: Yes. I remember particularly when we were opening the museum, I'd been so busy installing it all I hadn't had time to make up a little speech or a guided tour yet. It was absolutely manic working under those conditions to get it open for a specific time. The museum was going to be opened in the presence of King Juan Carols and Queen Sophie, and so what happened was that with obviously the Shah and the Queen and everyone else. This was rather intimidating for me as you can imagine -- so what happened was that Mr. Bahadori took around King Juan Carlos and I was to take around Her Majesty and Queen Sophie. I was so bloody nervous I couldn't speak, barely. I just totally lost my tongue. Her Majesty did the tour for me.

Q: Really!

Diba: She really did. I just managed to get out the very basic, and she knew everything about the whole collection because so much of it had come via her: the enamels, the bolur. I remember

specifically she talked about all the Bohemian crystal and I'm going, "Oh, yes, Your Majesty, that's right." [laughter] She was so gracious about it. Years later when Jahan Sadat came and I took her around, Her Majesty said to me, "Leyla, you were wonderful. Congratulations!" I thought, "Well, the only other time you heard me I was so nervous and so exhausted you had to do the job for me." These sort of things happened. I think she viewed the museums as her babies; she took a personal interest in them, a great personal interest, but she gave you total freedom in running them. I was never interfered with once.

Q: Because she trusted you?

Diba: Yes. I mean, I think that was why she had certain people running these. On an international level or national level they were very small projects. They really were, but they were visible politically. First of all because personalities came and went and they were associated with the royals. So in that sense it was a high profile kind of job and she wanted it to be run perhaps by low profile people in a way. As I said, I always found her very helpful if I ever went to her with a problem, very interested. I would bring say, the catalogues or if there was a work of art we were in hopes of getting, something like that. On a level of help, I think she's always been [there]; you could always go to her and say, "Can we do this? Could you be helpful here?" Or she herself would come and say, "Here's something for

you." She was very aware of art in general and what was going on.

I remember one time we were on a plane together and she called me over and she said, "You know there's an interesting collection of the sketches of a nineteenth century Iranian artist at the Daftar-e Makhsus. Why don't you go and look at this." Well, I'd never heard of these, and I would never had heard if she hadn't mentioned it. And sure enough I eventually trotted over to the Daftar-e Makhsus and I had access to these files and files of absolutely priceless, original sketches of this whole artistic family. And it was a unique circumstance.

Q: No one had ever informed you of this?

Diba: I don't think so.

Q: It was your domain.

Diba: It was, yes. But I wouldn't have known about it unless she had mentioned it. They were perfectly happy to show it to me once I said to them, "Her Majesty told me these things were here." By that time I was at the Negarestan and what was mine was mine and what was theirs was theirs. She often was a person to whom all information came. And this is the thing, you have to realize the information was there. It would come out whenever she felt it was appropriate. She never interfered. That just

was not her style. She gave you the general parameters. I think she sort of let you feel your way. I was with her a lot but I didn't talk much about the museum, because it was not something I considered of major importance. Maybe someone else would have taken every day, every occasion to spend or to use it as a sort of "tremplin." I found there was no need to involve her. The fact that she came to the museum a few times a year, the fact that she knew what the exhibitions were, that she knew what the art was that we were collecting, if there were any problems -- I would go to her sometimes but I wouldn't go to her much, because I was very conscious of the fact that one shouldn't abuse the access because it made you very unpopular with people you had to work with. Therefore, problems I very rarely went to her with, because she herself knew that if I went to her with a problem over Bahadori's and Nahavandi's head, the only person who was going to lose was going to be me. So I was very careful not to do it. I never did it. I don't think I ever did it.

Q: You were smart not to do it.

Diba: Well, it was just logical. That's what they were the most afraid of, if you had access. The people you had to work with were the most afraid that you would abuse it, so you had to be careful. There was no point in doing it.

Q: You're saying that she was well-informed and that she was a

wonderful patron of the arts. What about her directives? Were they effective?

Diba: I think they went through a lot of revisions and a lot of anguish before things got done. I think she herself was conscious of this, that there was bureaucracy along the way. This image of our royals as being supremely powerful is nonsense. Yes, they could give the orders; but it could take sometimes years for things to happen or dreams that she had. It was like the Myth of Sisyphus constantly taking a rock to the top and having it come to the bottom. So I think there were times, yes. But seeing how long it took to put the museums together, seeing what incredible contradictions of personalities and difficulties were involved, you have to think that often, no. Because there were many special interest groups often things got mislaid. And she had to fight perhaps very much for anything she wanted.

Q: Do you know of any particularly incidents?

Diba: I can't; I can just think of the way the museums developed, even in terms of Negarestan three or four people involved and each one wanting his own input and the conflicts. Something like the cultural center. This was a big source of controversy from day one. Why? Because it was Iranpur's baby. The Professor Fritch was jealous because it was his project and he should have been given it. This kind of thing. What her

ideals were and what all these difficulties were [added to it]. The change in the cabinet, the switch from Bahadori to Nahavandi -- all of this affected her plans for her project. Someone like Bahadori was a very good, what's the word? He tried to follow her directives as much as possible but he was not an initiator and he wasn't a political power any more.

Q: Nahavandi didn't try to?

Diba: Oh, no. I think he did, because it was very much in his interest to, and because he had a tremendous amount of push and because he already had a lot of power bases -- it was when Nahavandi came that the museums finally got off the ground. All those years when Bahadori was there. You can't attribute it only to the quality of the Chef du Cabinet, but part of it -- there was money; there was other circumstances. Everything finally came together. Nahavandi was a strong force because he wanted to have a very highly visible profile, I think, that he pushed these programs through. It wasn't just what the Queen wanted. There were many, many other things involved. So that's when the Carpet Museum opened, and he wanted the Carpet Museum. And the new cultural center and the T.M.O.C.A. He was a very strong personality. Maybe if you contrast the two, you would get an answer.

Q: Overall, were you ever aware of any acts of corruption?

Diba: No. I didn't see anything. But you know that I personally had very little access to funds. But as to my visually seeing anything -- yes, I had somebody in my office steal something. But personally I didn't see anything else.

[recorder off]

As we look back I think that it's very ironic that in the years that I was in Iran were the years in which tremendous events happened. It was as if time and events were really telescoped into a very, very short period. You saw the beginnings of Her Majesty's museums from the stumbling along with the Negarestan to a totally full-fledged, non-profit organization called Her Majesty's Foundation which finally came into being. And the Foundation was not just a paper foundation. I really want to emphasize that. From the Board of Trustees down to the Board of Directors to all the various things it was a very strong entity. I think the irony of it is perhaps it would even have been a political entity exactly what people had always been afraid of with her. Even though we think of the art scene as very small, as I said again, it was a highly visible scene. You could get a lot of press out of it; you could get a lot of propaganda out of it. So potentially there was a system set up by which the Queen's power base would have increased. It's very sad that it happened at a moment in time when already everything was falling

apart. So that we were out of sync with the rest of society. It was November '78 when I created my magnum opus about the Turkamans but you kept on working because you had to. You kept on working partly because you were like lemmings and you just kept on towards that cliff without pausing to think and there were no signs to tell you not to go there any longer. So I think it's really very interesting in terms of the art patronage, what was happening.

I have to say that there had been increasing criticism. In '78 we didn't have the Shiraz Festival because of what had happened the year before.

Q: What had happened the year before?

Diba: There had been a big scandal at Shiraz and the Bread and Puppet Theater. The whole city was used as a stage for various events. They used Karevansarai's and they used gardens. At one point the Bread and Puppet Theater which was a very radical European theater troupe did a sort of improvisational play behind a storefront and it included the killing of a baby. Well, this somehow spilled out into the street and caused a riot. It was a terrible incident, because there was a terrible clash, you can understand. Even Westerners have terrible trouble [laughs] understanding or accepting the Bread and Puppet Theater, not to speak of the local Shirazi seeing something like this. They would have gone nuts. So that had happened the year before. So

even though I say the Boniyad and all that, '77 was the height in terms of her achievements in the arts where she must have felt that finally everything was coming together. The museums were opened; everything was in place. And '78 was the year that everything started falling apart for everybody.

Q: How? In what ways did you feel it? Or did you feel that the Queen felt it?

Diba: Well, you had to feel it in the summer of '78. I had had some strange experiences because of the museum. The museum was very far downtown and I was a manager/director really. I was a manager which meant I often had a lot of contacts with the employees. And if you remember one of the centers of anti-government activity was in Tabriz, almost a year before the revolution happened. And I had a lady who worked for me for public relations who was vaguely related to some generals, but she worked for me as a public relations liaison, Mrs. Zandi. She came into my office one day practically in hysterics and told me about what was happening in Tabriz, that there were terrible riots; the police had intervened, and here was the shocker: a girl had been raped and thrown herself out of I don't know how many storied building to the street below. And that this was not one or two or three incidents. So I had had already come across something that to me was very shocking, and even though I never found out if it was the whole truth, she believed it. And she

started telling me, "There isn't anybody I don't know who didn't lose somebody in Tabriz." When she started telling me this, it was very frightening to know that there were whole groups of people who came out of military backgrounds in hysterics. Whether what she was saying was the truth or whether it was just rumors, the point was that she believed it, and she was an official working for me in a sensitive Court ministry position. So this was something that I recall as something that affected me a lot.

Q: It made you aware.

Diba: Yes. And the summer of course, the summer of '78, was the time in which a lot of things were developing, many, many riots everywhere. We were at Now Shahr and the atmosphere was pretty tense, very, very quiet. I remember the Shah was being urged to go on television and make some kind of statement and appeal to the people. I remember --

Q: This is what people were talking about in Now Shahr when you were there?

Diba: No, I don't think they were talking about it; we knew that it was happening, and we knew that Reza Qotbi was coming to interview him. Everything was done from Now Shahr in the summer.

Q: And Reza Qotbi was still accepted and not typed with --

Diba: Yes. This was in August, '78. The Shah gave a talk on television about how, "If you don't watch out, Iran will become an 'Iranistan'," and nobody understood what he was talking about. Now I don't know if that was in all the news, but I remember of all the things he said and I now understand what he meant by "Iranistan." But at that point I thought it was very cryptic.

Q: What did he mean by that?

Diba: I think he meant a satellite, a province and not a country any more, like Afghanistan and Pakistan; something that's a land of someone else, not a land of your own. That was very obvious there. And of course, Court life ceased.

Yes, except in an absolute minor way, very, very minor way. So that obviously was a pretty good indication. Eventually even though it had always been a rule at Court that you didn't talk politics, even though it wasn't politics any more, you couldn't avoid it. We didn't see the King at all after the fall, after maybe September, maximum October. He just wasn't seeing anybody. The Queen was aware but certainly for us -- at one point we said to her, "What can we do? Can we do anything?" She said, "Yes. Go out and do something," but there was nothing more than that.

Q: She was at a loss, confused as to what one could do?

Diba: I suppose so, yes. We were trying to think of what we could do!

Q: What were your ideas on what you could possibly do? Was there anything?

Diba: It was totally very naive. It was at a point in which there were a lot of marches and parades going on in Iran. If you remember, there was rioting in the city and so on, and my museum was in the center of it; it was a very bad place. Every day you were going through bullets. It was between Teheran University and the Majlis. So I was very concerned for the safety of my employees and for the safety of the museum, of the objects. I had removed everything into a bunker kind of situation and I was dismissing the employees so that when they traveled back and forth it was safe. You knew it was the time of the military law and we knew things were not going well. But even within this you kept on working, you kept on planning your shows, buying your art and doing everything. But contact with Her Majesty was very limited; you knew she was very aware. She didn't take me into her confidence; I wasn't a political advisor; there was no reason to. You knew that she was worried and that she was trying to do things; but what I can't say on a more specific level.

That we all would have wanted to do something was obvious, but there was no guideline. There were no rules to go by. I

remember thinking, "I'm a Modir (manager). I have sixty or eighty people who work for me. Why couldn't I get them to make some placards and go out in the street and protest?" They'd go for me; I knew they would! They came to me and asked me. They weren't upset. The people who worked for me didn't want to see the revolution happen obviously. Each person was given his own possibilities for: Could I or couldn't I do something.

There were two or three things that I think finally [made me aware]. One was this incident that I told you about with this lady. Another one was when you were no longer going out anywhere at night and you'd sit home and watch the television to find out what was happening to your own country or you'd listen to the BBC to find out what was happening. One night we were watching it and there was the so-called massacre of Teheran University that was filmed and put on television which was the single most shocking thing I saw. I don't know what you saw of it. But this was in October, I think. This was terrifying. I'd never seen anything like it. You heard about the riots, but you weren't there.

There was a terrible controversy afterwards as to why it had been put on T.V. and I know many people were terrified by it, because this really showed you that there was terrible opposition and that it was violent and that people were getting killed and they were maybe people you knew. So that was something you really couldn't have avoided.

Another thing that happened was just after the incident at

Jaleh Square. A sculptor called Parviz Tavallali came to my office and he told me about it.

Q: He was there?

Diba: No, he wasn't there. But he described it very vividly, and his emotionalism and his reaction affected me a great deal.

Q: What was his reaction?

Diba: Well, he was horrified. Everybody was horrified at the idea of civil war, at the idea of people being killed, at the idea of marches and demonstrations. But Jaleh Square was grossly exaggerated out of all proportion. I remember figures like three thousand finally came down to maybe fifty people who had been accidentally fired on. Who made sense in those days? You could say, "Well nobody was equipped to handle demonstrations in Iran," neither our Gendarmerie nor our Army, nor the SAVAK. None of these people knew how to deal with demonstrations, to contain them and not injure too many people. This is a science we didn't have. But his description -- when I think of the things that really, really stand out for me, these three or four incidents were what did it for me.

Q: Looking back Leyla, if you were to do it all over again, not just you -- but on a larger scale -- what would you change? What

do you regret?

Diba: I have to keep saying the words, ironic and irony, because you're caught in an historical moment, you're caught in a Catch-22 situation where you are totally dependent on the West, no matter how much you do. Either you're a product of your own culture which is medieval or you're a product of a Western culture which does not have any roots that can take hold of in your country. The fact that I'm aware of this, that I became aware of this by working in the Negarestan and afterwards by reading a book which very much influenced me. It's a book called Orientalism by a man called Edward Said. He's a Palestinian activist who teaches at Columbia University.

He dealt with the subject of how the West had perceived the near East since the nineteenth century. And in it he showed that we were basically the tools of the West. No matter how much we thought that we would think independently or we would act independently, the fact that you were educated abroad inevitably made you a kind of marionette. And he showed this in a three hundred page book that had to do with literature and the image of the near East in particularly French literature and so on. It applied to my field just as much. And if you think there's one thing that I'm going to do now is to make people aware of orientalism in the arts, if you like which is an attitude which is prevalent in the West, of snobbery, cultural snobbery, in which the products of the near East are considered as inferior to

anything produced in the West. That this was consciously or unconsciously present in practically everything we did is the irony!

I don't think Iran was unusual in that we were caught in this. I don't think anyone even understood this or many of us, certainly not the younger people. Maybe somebody like the old Iranian erudites, maybe even a man like Jamalzadeh or a constitutionalist fighter in 1906 would have understood more about this than we did. Modernism at any price is simply not what was going to succeed.

If I were to go back now, I would say, "How can we change that? How can you change that?". Khomeini's solutions is just shut the doors to the West, just the way China shut the doors to the West. Don't let anything filter through. Well, you can't live in a vacuum either, from the rest of the world which he's finding out now. You cannot go back and just teach what Mohammed said in the seventh century; you can't. It's impossible. Then again, what is this irony of fate, even in terms of the art scenes? The Iranians weren't competent enough; the Iranian-trained Iranians weren't competent enough, and the Western-trained Iranians weren't competent enough. Each one lacking what the other had! There had to be someone who should have both. Very little of it.

I have to be realistic about myself. I spoke a modicum of Farsi. I had a certain level of Farsi understanding. But God knows, if I had been a woman who had been able to read Qajar

history in the original manuscript Farsi I would have been a lot better off. But I couldn't! That wasn't my fault that the men who could weren't people who could run the museums. So again and again -- you see it over again. Or even I myself brought values to my job that were anathema, I think, to many Iranians, that I can say that the biggest turnout I had was for an exhibition of religious painting is very weird. What's strange about the whole situation -- the idea of an exhibition of religious painting is Western. This is where the hope is though. It was a Western idea in a royal museum and yet the people came to see it! The people just poured in! Why? Because I was speaking their language, without realizing it! But I was speaking their language because I had as I told you, this Dr. Hazave'i, who spoke their language. But he was willing to come and work with me. He didn't have any problem with me. I was very lucky.

Maybe if there had been such a possibility of having young people, idealistic young people, if you like, with big ideas, but getting them to work with someone of the people who understood the people more. I mean, that's on my own scale. I can't talk about what went wrong with the planning organization or what went wrong with the way we pumped oil out or why we had nuclear plants or so many other things.

But how would you do it over? I don't know, because I think I'm one of the persons who is extremely conscious of this cultural problem. I don't know how you do it, and I don't know of any country -- I think if I were to look at a country that I

would say we might learn something from, I would say India with all its problems.

I went there recently and in a way I was comparing it to Iran. It has unbelievable problems compared to Iran. But very early on they learned from Gandhi, if you brought modern technology to a local Indian village that made its living off the women sitting there hand-loomed material that would be sold in the bazaars, that you were going to destroy the village. Now Gandhi knew this. The Indians have more or less applied this. When you go to India, you drink Indian soft drinks. They taste horrible, but they're made and bottled in India. You only have Indian food, Indian clothes, whatever. The economy is rudimentary; it's old-fashioned. But they have a nuclear plant and device, too. But what I'm trying to say is that maybe the Indians -- they had independence and they had the British infrastructure which we didn't. The British when they pulled out of India they left them with a tremendous government and educational systems, a very strong foundation. So maybe that is a place.

Q: They allowed their roots to flourish.

Diba: Yes, and were conscious that modernism was not always the answer.

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