Parviz Tanavoli: Sculpted Poetry

The recent retrospective exhibition of one of Iran’s most famous sculptors has helped to broaden the scope of contemporary Iranian art for art historians around the world. In exploring the work of Parviz Tanavoli, I hope to illuminate his sculptural intersections of Persian tradition with contemporary form.

By Nina Cichocki

On 26 January 2003, the contemporary Iranian art world was enriched by a long-awaited event in the Tehran Museum of Modern Art: the opening of a retrospective exhibition of Parviz Tanavoli, modern Iran’s leading sculptor. Although a world-class sculptor in the 1960s and 1970s, Tanavoli has long been known to Western audiences and even art historians. There are a number of factors that account for his unsung obscurity: scholars of modern art still concentrate mainly on developments within their own European or American cultural horizons and are seldom familiar with the ideas underlying Tanavoli’s oeuvre, which is rooted in the cultural heritage of Islamic Persia. Scholars of Islamic art, on the other hand, focus on the past rather than the present. Here, I will discuss the relationship of Tanavoli’s oeuvre to Persian classical poetry, using as examples one early work as well as his most famous sculpture.

Poet with the symbol of freedom, 1966

Although many of Tanavoli’s bronzes depict humans, as we can gather from both their statuary forms and their titles, he obliterates distinct facial features, poses, or hand gestures, all of which carry the expression of sentiment. The Poet with the Symbol of Freedom sports a box-like shape with a perforated front where we would imagine the head to be. The perforated front, reminiscent of the grilles on the shrines Tanavoli has visited since his childhood, acts like a veil: it hides the poet’s face, harks all details and specifics, and, therefore, renders the poet’s feelings abstract and generalized. The cylindrical body is devoid of arms and hands or any bodiless feature, except for a generic faucet on the front (symbolizing the freedom that water in an arid country like Iran affords), and is, therefore, devoid of emotional gesture.

Iyonic Persian poetry, and particularly the form of the ghazal (a short poem with a monorhyme, seven to twelve verses long, usually about worldly and divine love), features some general characteristics that also help to elucidate the qualities of this sculpture. According to Annemarie Schimmel, a noted scholar on mystical poetry, the ghazal is not meant to describe exactly this or that state of mind or to tell of the poet’s personal situation in such a way that one can speak of a unique experience. [...] the ghazal is not meant to explain and illuminate the poet’s feelings: on the contrary, it is meant to veil them! (Schimmel 1992: 10). This tendency to veil rather than to explain emotions can be found in the first two lines of the ghazal entitled Happiness, written by Hafiz (1315-1390):

The phoenis of felicity
Shall fall into my net at last
If e’er the blessed shade of thee
Shed rust upon me riding past

Like bubbles rising in a glass
I’ll throw my cap into the air
And lettest fall thy image there
(Abery 1948: 131)

Hafiz does not expound on the immediate feeling of happiness, or closely describe the cause of it. Instead he hides behind metaphors (the phoenix of felicity shall fall into my net) or makes a side step by describing the actions resulting from happiness (like bubbles rising in a glass I’ll throw my cap into the air). This idea of simultaneous revealing and obscuring emerges not only in poetry, but also in other dimensions of Persian culture. Most notably in the architecture of the ubiquitous shrines, the grilles of which obstruct view and access, but simultaneously render the grave inside visible. Both the shrine’s grille and the poem draw an artful circle–consisting of metal rods and words, respectively–around their essential content, be it a grave or the feeling of happiness.

Along the same lines, Tanavoli reveals his emotions and ideas merely by creating his sculptures and exhibiting his inner world. Yet, at the same time he hides these revelations behind the veil of abstraction. He reducesposis the same means, that is the metaphor. In the case of the poem, it is the beloved beauty of God. The word heech (nothing) in Tanavoli’s sculpture works similarly, as attested by the sculptor himself: “Nothing” is an aspect of God. God is in all things and therefore in everything. The “nothing” is not God, but a place where God could be in his purest state (Morrison 1971: 108). Thus, both the poem and the sculpture can express the presence of God through the same means, that is the metaphor. In the case of the poem, it is the beloved that is a metaphor for God: in the case of the sculpture, it is the heech.

References


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Parviz Tanavoli, Poet with the Symbol of Freedom, 1966

Parviz Tanavoli, Hecch and Chair II, 1973