

HYPERALLERGIC

MoMA's Travel Ban Protest Exposes a Legacy of Closeted Modernism

While MoMA has received accolades for its rehang in protest of the so-called Muslim ban, the issue brings up many questions about the work that never gets shown and why.

Shiva Balaghi | March 15, 2017



Installation view of the collection galleries at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, including Marcos Grigorian's painting on the right. (photo by Robert Gerhardt, all images courtesy Museum of Modern Art and used with permission)

Ibrahim El-Salahi's "The Mosque" hangs in a gallery filled with Picassos. Parviz Tanavoli's 1964 sculpture, "The Prophet," is flanked by paintings by Gino Serverini and Umberto Boccioni. Marcos Grigorian's 1963 earthwork pairs beautifully with works by Alberto Burri and Antoni Tàpies. Zaha Hadid is exhibited alongside Henri Rousseau's masterpieces. Faramarz Pilaram's 1962 "Laminations (Les Lames)" is shown near works by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning. In the Museum of Modern Art's expansive lobby, Siah Armajani's sculpture "Elements Number 30" is installed against a wall of windows looking onto the museum's sculpture court and a New York cityscape.

The rehang of MoMA's permanent collection was a beautifully evocative gesture of protest. It also upended the very canon of modernism the museum helped shape over decades.

On January 27, the [White House](#) issued an [Executive Order](#) "protecting the nation from foreign terrorist entry in the United States." The travel ban denied entry into the U.S. by refugees, immigrants, and tourists born in seven Muslim-majority countries — Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Travelers already in transit when the executive order was signed were stranded. Some were barred from boarding US bound flights; others were detained for hours at major airports like JFK and LAX. As news spread, massive spontaneous protests erupted at airports across the US against what came to be known as "the Muslim ban."



Installation view of the exhibition *Recent Acquisitions: Painting and Sculpture*, on view April 6 to June 12, 1966 at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. (photo by Rolf Petersen)

Within days, curators transformed MoMA's galleries. Placards placed alongside works by artists from the banned countries read:

"This work is by an artist from a nation whose citizens are being denied entry to the United States, according to a presidential executive order issued on January 27, 2017. This is one of several such artworks from the Museum's collection installed throughout the fifth-floor galleries to affirm the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum, as they are to the United States."

It was a powerful reminder that museums are not just repositories of art. The reception to MoMA's protest was overwhelming, with dozens of international news outlets covering the story. Some press dubbed the protest "poignant" and "bold;" one reporter wrote the museum had "shown courage." Museum goers posted snapshots of the works on Instagram with hashtags like #MOMAIloveyou and #NoBanNoWall. MoMA's chief curator of drawings and prints, Christophe Cherix, explained the decision had been taken collectively by the museum's curators as "an inclusive gesture."

The spontaneous protest, a gesture of inclusion, quietly revised the museum's carefully honed history of modern art. MoMA was established in 1929 as a challenge to traditional museums. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., its founding director intended it to become "the greatest museum of modern art in the world." With a permanent collection of over 150,000 artworks, the museum boasts "one of the most comprehensive and panoramic views into modern art." Through his program of acquisitions, exhibitions, and publications, Barr helped shape the prevailing narrative of modern art history.



Ibrahim El-Salahi, "The Mosque" (1964)

When Barr passed away, the *New York Times* wrote, "he was possibly the most innovative and influential museum man of the 20th century." When he retired from MoMA in 1967, Barr counted among the museum's accomplishments under his leadership legitimizing "important arts of our time generally ignored by art museums" and encouraging "universities to accept the modern arts as a proper field for scholarly student and publication." Barr's influence reached beyond the museum walls—to collectors, art critics, scholars, and professors. Alongside his four decade career at MoMA, his books like *What is Modern Painting?* defined the parameters of modern art.

Barr's enduring legacy is reflected in the hanging of MoMA's permanent collection that now occupies the 4th and 5th floors of the museum. Iconic works from Picasso's Cubism, Monet's "*Water Lilies*" and Matisse's "*Dance*" to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, Mark Rothko's color plains and Andy Warhol's soup cans, anchor the museum's visual narrative of art history. Though Barr's acquisitions for the museum were international in scope, what was hung in the museum's permanent collection galleries remained largely Western.

To be sure, works by artist of West Asian and North African heritage have been integrated into MoMA's curatorial program. Indeed, Siah Armajani was included in the first ever exhibit of Conceptual Art mounted by the museum in 1970 — a show titled *Information*, curated by Kyanaston McShine. "Siah

Armajani has made visible one computer activity by stacking the total printout of all the digits between zero and one into a 500 pound 9 ½ foot tall column of 25,974 pages,” read the [museum’s press release](#) at that time. Armajani’s sculptures were also featured in survey exhibitions at MoMA in 1984 and 1995. His 1991 *Bridge Book* is included in the Drawings and Prints Collection of MoMA.



Siah Armajani, “Elements Number 30” (1990) (photo by Robert Gerhardt)

More recently, artists like Rabih Mroué and Mona Hatoum have been exhibited in rotating shows of contemporary art from the museum’s collection. MoMA’s Project 101 often includes small but revelatory exhibitions by artists including Akram Zaatari and Slavs and Tatars. In 2015, MoMA’s PS1 mounted a stunning exhibition of Wael Shawky’s *Cabaret Crusades*, an epic video trilogy accompanied by a series of esoteric puppets displayed in vitrines. Later that year, MoMA mounted Walid Raad’s first comprehensive US museum survey. Still, Iranian, Arab, and other artists from the region remained excluded from the iconic galleries that displayed modern art from the museum’s permanent collection.

Many of the art works featured in MoMA’s protest against the travel ban were in fact acquired by the museum in the 1960s. Typically, the artworks were shown only once in exhibitions of recent acquisitions and then taken to storage where they remained for decades. I have called this art “a closeted modernism.”

According to [MoMA's notes](#), the 1964 painting by Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi which now hangs in a gallery devoted to Picassos was acquired by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in 1965. Trained at London's Slade School, El-Salahi sought to make art that was both modern and resonated locally in the Sudan. Credited as a founder of the Khartoum School of modernism, his abstraction incorporates both Arab and African influences. In 2013, the Tate Modern hosted the exhibition, [Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist](#). Curated by Salah Hassan, an art historian at Cornell University, the exhibition was organized with the New York Museum for African Art and traveled to the Sharjah Art Museum before being shown at the Tate. At the time, [Artforum](#) noted, "Tate Modern has made a commitment to expanding — or even exploding — the Euro-American canon of postwar art." Still, it would be another 52 years before MoMA exhibited El-Salahi's artwork for a second time.

Andre Derain	84
George Grosz	77
Roy Lichtenstein	57
Andy Warhol	48
Agnes Martin	24
Robert Indiana	24
Marcos Grigorian	2
Mohsen Vaziri	1
Ahmed Yacoubi	1

Number of times artists in 1966 Recent Acquisitions show were exhibited at MoMA (graphic courtesy the author, and data culled from <http://spelunker.moma.org>)

The following year, in 1966, MoMA's recent acquisitions exhibition was organized by Dorothy C. Miller with Barr serving as an advisor. The exhibit included abstract paintings by Moroccan Ahmed Yacoubi and Iranian Mohsen Vaziri-Moqaddam, as well as an earthwork canvas by Iranian Armenian Marcos Grigorian. None of these works would ever be exhibited at MoMA again, until Grigorian's work was included in the protest against the travel ban. Using [data accumulated by MoMA](#), I've assembled the following information on the artists featured in the 1966 exhibition.

MoMA's press release on the exhibit dated April 6, 1966, noted, "The international character of the Museum Collections is well illustrated in the exhibition although 27 of the artists represented are American." While the museum clearly took pride in collecting international art, the hanging of its permanent collection was framed as largely Western. What accounts for this discrepancy? Clearly Alfred Barr, Jr. and his assistants took great care in selecting the works that were acquired by the museum, as explained by the [1966 press release](#):

Usually about half the acquisitions are purchases, half gifts. Many of the gifts have been solicited; that is, the Museum has sought out a donor for a work it has already selected. Other gifts have been proposed by the donors themselves, who often permit the Museum its choice from the work of a living artist.... All acquisitions are studied, discussed and voted on by the Committee on the Museum Collections ... before being submitted to the Board of Trustees ... Works of art brought before the Committee by the curatorial staff of the Museum in consultation with the Director of the Museum Collections, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and subcommittees on Drawings and Prints, Photograph and Architecture and Design.

So the paintings and sculptures by artists from Iran and the Arab world underwent a rather strict vetting process. The various committees and the Board would have ensured that these artworks met the aesthetic and art historical mandates of the museum. The question remains, why then were they stored away for half a century?

"The politics of art are only a diminutive parody of the politics of real power," observed the [critic Robert Hughes](#). Were Cold War exigencies at play in establishing a canonical view of modern art as fundamentally Western? Art was a powerful tool of Cold War politics. On the occasion of MoMA's 25th anniversary, in October 1954, President Eisenhower spoke at the museum:

To me, in this anniversary, there is a reminder to all of us of an important principle that we should ever keep in mind. This principle is that freedom of the arts is a basic freedom, one of the pillars of liberty in our land ... But, my friends, how different it is in tyranny. When artists are made the slaves and the tools of the state; when artists become chief propagandists of a cause, progress is arrested and creation and genius are destroyed.



Another Installation view of the exhibition *Recent Acquisitions: Painting and Sculpture*, on view April 6 to June 12, 1966 at The Museum of Modern Art, with Marcos Grigorian's painting on the far right. (photo by Rolf Petersen, image courtesy MoMA)

In the 1956 edition of his seminal book, *What is Modern Painting*, Barr cited Eisenhower's speech on art and freedom, delivered at MoMA. The art historian Patricia Hills has shown the influence of Cold War politics on Alfred H. Barr, Jr.'s framing of art history.

The Middle East was a primary theater for Cold War politics. And in this articulation, modern art was a measure of tyranny versus freedom. To show that the artists in this region were already imbued with a sense of the modern was to counter the narrative that the Middle East needed to become modern by entering the Western sphere of influence. Did Cold War politics, in which Barr and MoMA were embedded, lead to a political decision to exclude Iranian and Arab art from the canon of modernism? If the decision to show the works in 2017 as a protest against the travel ban was ultimately a political one, so too was the choice to keep the work off MoMA's walls for half a century.

Still, the beautifully powerful gesture of inclusion currently on display at MoMA taps into another curatorial direction Barr advocated — expanding the scope of what is considered American art. In the winter of 1929, the museum mounted its second exhibition. *Paintings by Nineteen Living American Artists* actually included works by six foreign-born artists. Barr pointed this out in his foreword to the exhibition catalogue. “America has not hesitated in the past,” he wrote, “to claim such expatriates as Whistler or

Sargent or Mary Cassatt. Some of the painters in the exhibition are perhaps more obviously and essentially American than Sterne or Weber or Pascin but it is questionable whether any are better painters. Those who chose the exhibition were concerned principally with the quality of these men as artists.”



Marcos Grigorian, "Untitled" (1963)

In rehanging its permanent collection, MoMA has finally opened another chapter in the history of American art. When MoMA acquired the work by Marcos Grigorian that is currently on view, the artist was living in New York City. His friend the artist Parviz Tanavoli recalls visiting Grigorian in his lower Manhattan studio. The eccentric Grigorian had developed a friendship with Willem De Kooning, who would stop by his studio for tea. Grigorian was an avid collector of Persian coffee house paintings, some of which he hung in his studio. Fascinated with the pieces of Iranian folk art, De Kooning offered Grigorian a trade – one of his abstract canvases for a particular coffee house painting. Grigorian was struggling financially at the time, Tanavoli recalls. “I told him why don’t you do it,” Tanavoli tells me. “Marcos replied ‘The painting De Kooning wants is the heart of my collection; without that, the collection is dead’.”

In the early 1960s, when he made his sculpture “The Prophet,” now being exhibited at MoMA, Tanavoli was living in Minnesota, teaching at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. That year, his close friend the collector Abby Weed Grey held the first exhibition of her growing art collection in Minneapolis. With a pencil, Grey wrote on the small exhibition booklet titled “Deep Roots,” from May 1964: “1st show in my ‘own’ gallery (upstairs) ‘devised’ by Sia Armajani [sic].” That same year the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi traveled to New York City with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. There, he befriended American artists like Jacob Lawrence and Richard Hunt.

There are so many stories embedded in the artworks MoMA has tucked away in storage all these years. Willem de Kooning’s interest in Iranian folk painting. Growing friendships between African and African-American artists. Art students in Minnesota being taught by an Iranian sculptor. These too are facets of American art, cultural flows that inflected this country’s heritage.

Exhibiting art often stimulates an entire ecology of knowledge production. The museum produces scholarly publications with related essays and documentation. Art critics write about the art and the artists in newspapers and magazines. Scholars are triggered to extend their research into new directions. Art history professors integrate the art into their courses. The implications of shuttering this art for decades, then, are far reaching. MoMA’s poignant protest has reframed the boundaries of modern art and of American art. There is much work to be done.