“Andy Warhol in Tehran”

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In 1975 Andy Warhol was invited to a state dinner at the White House to honor the Shah and Empress of Iran. He quickly set about making the royal couple clients for his high profile services as a celebrity portraitist. Warhol and a handful of employees visited Tehran in early 1976 to consult on the portrait of Farah Pahlavi, the Empress. In 1978, having finished a portrait of the Shah, he was set to return for its unveiling at a state art fair that was postponed due to threats from "xenophobic" groups. The fair, of course, never took place, having been superseded by the Revolution. Warhol's encounter with Iran's royal family coincided with Farah Pahlavi's oversight of spectacular Western and Iranian art collections. Following the Revolution the collection of contemporary American art -- including works by Pollack, De Kooning, Lichtenstein, Lewitt, Johns, Judd, Warhol and others -- was sheltered by curators in the basement of Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art for decades. The paintings were the stuff of art world legend, shown only infrequently to visitors and sometimes rumored to be traded off or destroyed. Footage surfaced of a Warhol portrait of the former Empress slashed with knives. In 2005 the collection surfaced temporarily, but was put in storage again until 2012, when they were once again put on display, where they remain on view today. This paper considers Warhol's portraits of the former Iranian royal family -- and the larger collection assembled by Pahlavi -- in multiple contexts: the world of US/Middle East oil relations of the 1970s; Warhol's celebrity portraits of the 1970s; and today's art market, in which Warhol commands prices higher than any other contemporary painter. His portraits of the Shah and Empress of Iran, for instance, were shown at Art Abu Dhabi in 2009, by the same Iranian-born, New York-based gallerist who helped Pahlavi assemble her collection decades earlier. In a contemporary context they -- and the Tehran collection for which they were intended -- allow us to ask key questions about the potential meanings of 20th-century American Pop in a 21st-century global market.