

Original Research Article

## Analysis of Effective Social Contexts in the Creation of Bahman Mohassess's Artworks, Based on Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of «Practice»

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Bahman Mohassess is one of the greatest leading artists in Iran's modernist art, who lived in politically, socially, and culturally tense periods. Expressing issues such as «condemnation of existence», «passivity», and «isolation» are among the most important themes of his works of art. In this research, by adopting a sociological approach and theoretically expanding the basic concepts of «Habitus», «Field», «Capital» and «Theory of Practice», an attempt was made to shed light on one aspect of the reasons for the distinction in the works of this artist. Therefore, the current research, focusing on the authentic and recent opinions of the famous French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, seeks to answer two fundamental questions: «What were the social contexts affecting the formation of Bahman Mohassess's artistic habitus» and «What were the social contexts affecting the level of acceptance of Bahman Mohassess's artworks by the audience of his works?» The current research aims to find social factors influencing the distinction of specific works using the concept of Bourdieu's Practice. Accordingly, this study is fundamental and qualitative.

**Research Method:** This research is qualitative and fundamental. Its method is descriptive-analytical, and the data was collected using a library-based technique.

**Findings:** According to Bourdieu, people's habitus is built over time and based on social conditions. Thus, Mohassess's specific personal, social, and family experiences have formed his artistic character. On the other hand, the social contexts of the period in question had caused the formation of cultural fields that were different from the artistic capital of the artist, and this caused a low level of acceptance of his works by society.

**Conclusion:** According to the research conducted, it can be concluded that individual, social, and family experiences played a role in forming Mohassess's artistic character. On the other hand, the social contexts of the period in question had caused the formation of cultural fields that were different from the artistic capital of the artist, and this caused a low level of acceptance of his works by society.

### Keywords

Sociology of Art, Bahman Mohassess, Pierre Bourdieu, Theory of Practice

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### **Introduction and Problem Definition**

Bahman Mohassess (1945-2010), one of the pioneering artists in modern Iranian art, has engaged in artistic experimentation and creation across various fields. However, his main artistic activities have been concentrated on painting and sculpture. The unique character of Mohassess and the distinctive features present in this artist's works have given his pieces a remarkable value, such that these works have apparent differences from those of his contemporaries. Moreover, Bahman Mohassess lived in an era with various historical, political, and social events. Undoubtedly, these factors have significantly contributed to the emergence of distinction in his works. The main focus of the present research is the analysis of these contexts and the reasons behind the formation of a specific type of representation in Mohassess's works. The present research aims to analyze the social contexts influencing the emergence of Bahman Mohassess's paintings, based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of «Practice»; this can play a beneficial role in recognizing the artistic values of one of Iran's modern and global artists, providing the necessary research opportunities for further studies by other researchers. The necessity of interdisciplinary studies, critique, and theorization in arts is another significance of this research. This project is a study for better understanding the nature and manner of artistic creations and the relationship between the artist and the audience. Considering the role of art sociology studies in deciphering the factors influencing individual actions, a sociological approach was chosen to address this issue. In the meantime, considering the capabilities of Pierre Bourdieu's «Theory of Practice» as one of the most recent and comprehensive theories in the sociology of art for analyzing artistic fields and the role of social factors involved, including artists and audiences, in the formation and continuation of specific artistic forms, this theory was chosen to guide and organize this research. Bourdieu's theory provides the opportunity to justify actions as needed; Bourdieu's Theory of Practice, based on its concepts, attempts to present the principles that generate human behavior. Given the significance of Bahman Mohassess's works in the contemporary modernist art movement of Iran, researchers have tried to interpret and analyze the artist's works; however, attention to the social contexts shaping the artist's character and the prevailing conditions in the art field, as well as the roles of its players, has not received as much focus as the artist himself. Since Pierre Bourdieu's theory of «Practice» has revealed its capabilities in uncovering the hidden aspects of the production and presentation of artworks and the prevailing conditions, conducting this research based on this theory could open new horizons for interpreting Bahman Mohassess's works.

### **Research Method**

By its subject and conditions, the present study adopts a qualitative method of the descriptive-analytical and historical type. The research's objective and implementation criteria are applied, as it is limited to a specific time and place. This study analyzes the conditions and relationships involved in the research topic. The samples examined in this research include eight paintings and eight sculptures by the artist. In this study, an effort has been made to select samples of the artist's works from different periods of his career and to analyze them in light of the social conditions of those periods. Considering the nature of the research, the data collection method utilized documentary sources, including books, internet resources, official written documents related to the research, letters, articles, and news from newspapers and magazines of the period under study, as well as scientific articles related to

that era. Regarding the difficulties in accessing data, regarding the limitations and time allowed the researcher, an effort was made to utilize documents and records sufficiently to scrutinize better the various aspects of the issues related to the research during the mentioned period for data analysis using Bourdieu's methodology, a multifaceted and simultaneous analysis is required, which, depending on the conditions and subject of the research, employs document analysis, biographical study, ethnographic case study, and other methodological approaches.

### **Research Background**

Regarding research background, various sources, including books, theses, and articles, have conducted numerous studies on sociology, painting, and the research approach, namely Pierre Bourdieu's «Theory of Practice». However, a deep and comprehensive analysis of the social contexts influencing the formation of Mohassess's artistic habitus, which is the specialized subject of the present research, has not been conducted; thus, it demonstrates the necessity and innovation of this study. The background of this research can be organized into two sections: First, in applying Bourdieu's Theory of Practice and Field in social analyses of the production and consumption of arts, and second, in studies conducted on Bahman Mohassess's works. In the field of applying Bourdieu's Theory of Practice in social analyses of the production and consumption of arts: In an article entitled «Dialectics of Habitus and Field in Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice», «Jamshidiha and Parastesh» (2007) have examined Bourdieu's integrative theory within the scope of social sciences. In an article entitled «A Sociological Study of the Relationship between the Audience and Contemporary Art, with a Focus on Anish Kapoor's Works», «Valaei» (2016) examines the distance between the artist, the artwork, and the audience, as well as the existing methods for raising the cultural level of society and creating a stronger connection between the audience and contemporary art. According to this research, urban art is the fastest and most effective tool for creating a connection between the audience and contemporary artworks and raising the cultural level of society. In an article entitled «Determining and Explaining the Indicators of a Valuable Handicraft in Iran from the Perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's Theories», «Dorani» (2018) discussed the factors involved in elevating the value of handicrafts to the level of being eminent. This research is based on the sociological perspective because society defines and identifies handicrafts. In the field of studies conducted on Bahman Mohassess's works regarding the formation of the modern art movement and the wave of modernism in Iran, there are books in Persian and English written by «Ruyin Pakbaz», «Aydin Aghdashloo», «Javad Mojabi», and other writers who have often presented their ideas in the form of thematic articles. Most of the sources that have focused on Bahman Mohassess are in the form of articles about the artist and some of his works or interviews with Bahman Mohassess about his way of thinking and artistic language. «Faroughi», in (1967), in collaboration with «Bijan Safari», produced a documentary about Bahman Mohassess, entitled «The Eye That Hears», for the Iranian National Television. This documentary is a short film of a night in Mohassess's life, in which the artist talks about himself and his beliefs and eventually engages in painting. In this documentary, Mohassess introduces himself as a historical figure for this country and considers the essence of his works to be a condemnation of existence, displayed through the audacity of nudity and physical imperfections. A book from the collection of Mahsasi's works entitled «Bahman Mohassess» was published in 1977 (1355 in the Iranian calendar)

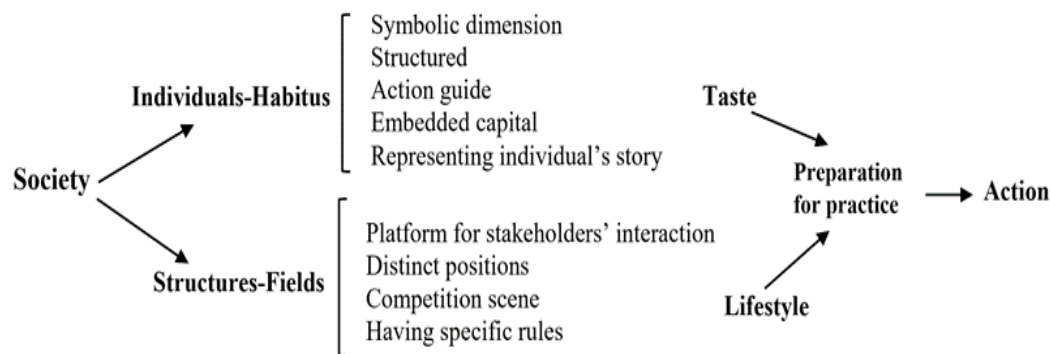
by Giuseppe Selvaggi, an Italian critic in Rome, in Italian with an English translation. It is a description and critique of some of Bahman Mohassess's works. In 2007, the second book from the collection of Mohassess's works, with the same previous title, was published this time by Società Editrice Romana in Italy. This book showcases over six decades of Mohassess's artistic life and is a valuable document of his career, with a preface by Enrico Crispolti. The book's text is only in Italian. In his thesis entitled «The Grotesque in Bahman Mohassess's Works from Mikhail Bakhtin's Perspective», «Taheri» (2010) also examined the process of creating artwork during the transitional period using Bakhtin's views. In the final section of this research, he analyzed the grotesque in Bahman Mohassess's works. In his thesis entitled «A Study of the Life and Works of Bahman Mohassess», «Khalatbari» (2012) analyzes the life and works of Bahman Mohassess as one of the few influential figures in contemporary Iranian visual arts. While recounting the artist's biography, he delves into the main components of Mohassess's work. In a documentary entitled «Fifi Howls from Happiness», «Farahani» (2013) narrates the life story of Bahman Mohassess. In fact, this documentary is a report on the last days of the artist's life, and in it, we become familiar with Mohassess and some of his works through the artist's own words. In his master's thesis entitled «Comparative Study of the Works of Mohammad Siyahqalam and Bahman Mohassess», «Peyravi» (2014) conducted a comparative analysis of the works of Siyahqalam and Mohassess using a descriptive-analytical method. He discovered new similarities in their artworks and personalities by studying their works. Among these similarities are the focus on humans and their bodies, animals, hybrid and monstrous beings, and attention to objects and concepts such as the grotesque, expressionism, and theatrical and dramatized dimensions. «Khalatbari» (2017) also explained and elaborated on the life and work periods of Bahman Mohassess in his book entitled «Bahman». In this book, he attempted to gather data by utilizing the testimonies of eyewitnesses or referencing numerous documents such as magazines and publications, as well as his own interviews with Mohassess. In fact, it can be said that this book is a report on the 80-year life of Bahman Mohassess based on reliable documents. None of the mentioned studies has paid attention to the prevailing social conditions of the relevant period and their impact on the artist's works. In the present research, the aim is to focus on the social conditions as well as the personal life and intellectual currents of the artist and to examine their impact on the emergence of distinctions in Mohassess's works. For this purpose, Bourdieu's theories were utilized, and they are among the most reputable and recent in various fields.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The sociology of art studies took a more serious form in theoretical art studies in the second half of the twentieth century. Among the factors drawing attention to such studies in the field of art has been the emergence of prominent theorists in the sociology of art during these periods. Pierre Bourdieu (1910-2002) is one of these sociologists who played a significant role in directing and enhancing the status of art sociology studies with his theoretical works and case studies. He primarily studied how arts are produced and offered, combining objective and subjective approaches and presenting them in theories such as «Field» and «Habitus». The structure of Bourdieu's thought possesses a theoretical generality. While having an intertwined relationship with each other, the components of this generality also have independent concepts.

**1. Pierre Bourdieu and the Theory of «Practice»:** Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a renowned French sociologist and anthropologist. He primarily focused on issues such as power dynamics and various methods of power transmission within and between different generations in society. He, influenced by the thoughts of Gramsci, Heidegger, Marx, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Panofsky, proposed the theory of cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital against the economic forms of capital. Bourdieu, who had experience living in and experiencing social conditions both in the village and the city, recognized the factors and consequences of uneven development in society. While critiquing the views of individuals like Marx, he provides a comprehensive definition of social class. In addition to the economic aspect that includes income and wealth, Bourdieu also defined capital for individuals in terms of cultural, social, and even lifestyle and taste (Grenfell, 2010, 9-13). The Theory of Practice is presented in the framework of Bourdieu's fundamental concepts: habitus, capital, and field. Habitus is an organized system that is also capable of organizing. The function of habitus is to reproduce and shape forms of social practice. Habitus consists of three types of schemes: Perceptual schemes, which help the actor understand the surrounding environment; Cognitive schemes, which guide the cognitive classification and evaluation of the surrounding environment; and action schemes, which reproduce the actor's related actions (Schutzeichel, 2012, 462). In every individual, there are habitus that are formed throughout their life and the environments in which they have lived. Therefore, the prevailing atmosphere of a person's living environment is important in forming these habitus, as they are created within that same environment. In general, habitus are patterns for division and classification based on tastes, beliefs, and attitudes. Therefore, individuals are neither completely free agents nor passive products of social structure (Seidman, 2007, 198-197). On the one hand, each individual can occupy a specific position and level within the social space based on their economic, social, and cultural capital. Individuals and groups who have the greatest access to these capitals fall into a concept known as the power field. There are various types of fields. Bourdieu, in his writings, has referred to some of them, including the economic field, the social field, the power field, the educational field, the artistic field, the administrative and political field (Grenfell, 2010, 131), the aesthetic field, the legal field, the religious field (Lash, 2004, 341-340), the journalism field (Bourdieu, 2011, 73), and the literary field (Parastesh, 2011, 119). In fact, it can be said that society is a collection of social fields, some of which are independent and some of which transcend class struggles within themselves. When social life took shape due to evolution, the division of labor also emerged. In the differentiation process, economic, legal, religious, artistic, civil, and political categories were separated and distinguished from each other. In every field, individuals, and as Bourdieu puts it, the actors, exhibit distinct behaviors and follow different logics because each field has its own specific rules and regulations. It is the field that organizes actions and representations beyond it (Shayanmehr, 2015, 42). Another concept is the word «culture». Pierre Bourdieu considers culture not only as the attainment of artistic and cultural possessions but also as a repository of values and actions. Cultural practices become more prominent through social belonging, and this phenomenon is based on the logic of distinction. The function of social space is rooted in the desire to differentiate between groups and individuals, which means being recognized and acknowledged as important by others. Here, it seems that social identity emerges, and this identity is based on surname, belonging to a lineage, religion, nationality, occupation, and so on. The Theory of Action, as presented in these concepts, is based on the premise that an individual's actions

are not based on intention but rather on acquired readiness and abilities. In fact, the driving force behind the behavior and practices of each individual is their habitus, and it is the difference in these habitus that creates the variation in actions, behaviors, and beliefs among individuals or groups. Habitus does not impose actions on individuals but rather drives them as a logical necessity. In fact, practices or actions are heavily influenced by habitus, and habitus is shaped by an individual's capital. Consequently, to understand the practices, behaviors, and beliefs of individuals, which are referred to as dispositions, one must first examine the individual's habitus. To comprehend and recognize this habitus, it is essential to understand the prevailing space and valuable capital for the field. As shown in Diagram 1, all the aforementioned concepts, including habitus, field, capital, and distinction, ultimately lead to the formation of individual practice and action.



**Fig 1.** Classification of Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (Grenfell, 2010, 19).

**2. Bourdieu's Methodology:** Bourdieu's method is a combined approach in which the researcher must, during the study, achieve newer observations through a dialectical and continuous back-and-forth process between mind and object, theory and practice, and thought and experience, and constantly refine his theory. «According to Bourdieu, the subject of research is an issue produced by society» (Grenfell, 2010, 319). According to Bourdieu, a comprehensive understanding of the researcher and obtaining ample information about the environments and positions of the research fields in question is essential in designing field analyses. Therefore, while familiarizing himself with the research environment, the researcher must scrutinize the biographies, personal and professional histories of the agents, and their practical positions in light of the logic of field actions. Considering the discussions presented in this study, an effort will be made to explain the reasons behind Bahman Mohassess's actions in his society based on Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. For this purpose, the social field and the field of power, the political field from the 1920s to the 1980s, are first examined. Then, the relationship between the political field and the field of art is considered. The next stage involves analyzing the artist's position in the field and identifying their habitus, capital, and distinctions. The final stage will be the analysis of the findings based on Bourdieu's theories.

### **Political and Social Fields and their Impact on the Artistic Styles of Artists from the 1320s to the 1380s (Solar Calendar).**

At the beginning of the 1920s, in the Solar calendar, artists became acquainted with new artistic methods following certain events. Among these events were the death of Kamal-ol-Molk and the decline of his school, the establishment of the Faculty of Fine Arts and the teaching of Western schools by foreign professors to students, the continuation of some students' studies in Europe and the introduction of Western methods to Iran, the expansion of World War II and the ousting of Reza Shah, followed by the diminished power of Mohammad Reza Shah in the 1920s and the emergence of limited social freedoms (Ghodarzi, 2012, 89). In the years of World War II and during the period of the oil industry nationalization movement, the activity of the press increased, making social caricature possible. In this period, graphic art was generally still in its early stages compared to painting (Pakbaz, 1999, 892). In the late 1920s (Solar calendar), political events and social and cultural developments led to fundamental changes in artists' works. Many people were attracted to the Tudeh Party in various matters, regardless of their political orientation. However, the trend of Iranian visual arts in the post-constitutional period did not keep pace with other trends of that period, and visual artists did not engage as activists in this field like others. At this time, visual art was mostly limited to caricatures, protest placards, cover designs, and graphic works. In the 1930s, the trend of modernist art intensified. In the 1940s, Iran became a developing country. Meanwhile, the seriousness of modernist art, the acquisition of more experience by artists, and the recognition and acceptance of this by society led to the expansion of modern art. After that, artistic and cultural movements, as well as institutions and centers, increased in Iran, and artists gained a desirable status. In later periods, with the establishment of the first Tehran Biennale, it seemed that government officials officially recognized Iran's modernist art. The Biennale was an exhibition of the works of innovators. Expressionism in Iranian painting emerged during these years, and afterward, a tendency towards the abstract style developed among painters. In the 1940s, this phenomenon expanded and even became exaggerated. The emergence of Expressionism in Iranian painting also dates back to the first Tehran Biennale in 1337 in the Solar calendar (1958), after which a tendency towards abstraction developed among young painters. The artistic transformations in America during the 1950s (Solar calendar) also influenced Iranian artists. Those who traveled to America brought back artistic trends known as «Pop Art». These events continued in Iran's 1940s to 1960s (Solar calendar) (Ghodarzi, 2012, 110). It can be said that in the 1940s, the royal court and government officials, as well as many state institutions, supported art and artists. Several galleries, art centers, and museums were established in Tehran and other cities, each promoting and disseminating new art in their own way. Therefore, the number of artists and the diversity of their works were on the rise (Pakbaz, 1999, 893). In 1357, in the Solar calendar (1978), with the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution, a new era was created for artists. Some artists in this period believed that art was not just for entertainment and beauty but for the people and about the people, and it should display people's movements and also inspire them to act. This art was known as committed art. After this period, following Iraq's invasion of Iran and throughout the years of war, art took on political, religious, and epic themes. Modernists left Iran or refrained from artistic work for a long time in these circumstances. Some also changed their style. After the end of the war, centers, universities, and galleries opened, and the number of artists in various fields increased. Eventually, after several years of this

period, in 2003 and 2005, the works of new media artists in the fields of installation art, video art, and land art made their way to the Venice Biennale.

## **Bahman Mohassess**

By examining the biography of Bahman Mohassess, the various political and social events of that era, and the differences in the artist's works over time, his career resume can be divided into distinguishable periods. Bamdad Mohassess's introduction to art can be traced back to around 1935, when he was 14 or 15 years old, and met Habib Mohammadi, the Lahijani painter known as the father of modern painting in Gilan. He went to his workshop for training. Mohassess's works during this period mainly focused on learning the principles of painting and lacked any specific ideological or artistic style. Around 1948, Mohassess moved to Tehran. Familiarity and interaction with prominent figures of that era, as well as learning about contemporary art movements with «Jalil Ziaipur» and collaborating with various magazines and associations, led to a new chapter in Mohassess's life, works, and intellectual currents. His political-artistic activities mainly involved creating propaganda posters for the Tudeh Party and portraits of political figures such as «Mossadegh» or «Khalil Maleki». In the 1930s (Solar calendar), the modernist art movement intensified with the efforts of individuals like Zia Pour. Mohassess's connection with this person led to the formation and recognition of modern art for him. During this period, we witness several works with different styles from the artist (Khalatbari, 2017, 95). After that, Mohassess went to Italy. Among his most important activities during this period were his studies in Italy, internships and work at the workshop of Ferruccio Ferrazzi, etching, dubbing, and possibly sculpture (Farahani, 2013). The 1940s (Solar calendar) and its cultural-artistic movements marked the beginning of Bahman Mohassess's fame and reputation. Mohassess's first attempts to isolate the subject, objectify the human body, and deform it began during this period. Among the characteristics of the works from this period are sharp and biting humor, strange and ironic titles for the works, and the use of texture to express emotions. Many of Mohassess's moral characteristics and personality traits emerge from this period. His works are primarily abstract figures with clawless hands, faces devoid of gaze that caricature the void and loneliness of contemporary humans, naked, defenseless, small heads indicating foolishness, blurred facial features indicating lack of identity, and large bodies that are the center of animalistic desires.





**Fig 1.** «Fifi Howls from Happiness», oil on canvas, 70x50 cm, 1964, part of the private collection of the Haeri-Zadeh brothers. Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 209.



**Fig 2.** «Man by the Boat», oil on canvas, 150x100 cm, 1966. Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 215.

One of the most important paintings by Mohassess from this period is Fig 1, entitled «Fifi Howls from Happiness». In this painting, Fifi, with a red and fiery body, howls profoundly and long, caught in a mix of emotions of anger, shame, fear, and happiness, teetering on the edge between laughter and tears. He has a long neck and a mass-like body, which itself is a sign of protest and a cry. The beach is one of the most common settings depicted in Mohassess's works. In the artist's works, the beach is a limbo-like place. An in-between and border-like position. A place between two worlds where nothing can be done except endure a hard wait. The painting «The Beached Boat» or «Man by the Boat» is the same in the second figure. In his later works, Mohassess enters the world of mythology. The use of mythology for him was symbolic and had a personal interpretation, without a tendency towards nostalgia or conservatism. «The Book of Creation» was the title of an exhibition held in Esfand 1345 (1966) (Masoudi, 1966). Mohassess has few selections from Greek myths and stories, including «Minotaur», «Centaur», «Leda», and «Icarus». It can be said that the main common feature found between these characters and Mohassess's works is the concept of duality, which addresses the inner conflicts of the characters. For example, the painting «The Fall of Icarus» depicts a man caught between two worlds, belonging to neither and dissatisfied with his situation. His attempts to escape this predicament lead to his downfall and ruin. Another example is «The Minotaur». The «Minotaur» is actually a wild and powerful male; however, in Mohassess's works, this creature is often depicted as lonely, isolated, and trapped within the narrow frame of the painting. The choice of hybrid creatures to express alienation, helplessness, and isolation is evident in Mohassess's works. The human-animal nature of the «Minotaur» in Mohassess's works places them in a liminal and helpless state. Mohassess's despairing view of human degeneration in the context of

war is now manifested by depicting small heads for thoughtless humans. «Ahmad Faroughi» collaborated with «Bijan Safaari» in 1967 to create a documentary entitled «The Eye That Listens». This documentary is a short film about a night in the life of Bahman Mohassess, in which the artist talks about his beliefs. He considers himself a historical figure for Iran and sees the theme of his works as «condemnation to existence». In 1968, at the second Shiraz Arts Festival, Mohassess presented several prominent paintings, the most important of which was «Robo and Meccano». This painting (Fig 3.), features intertwined figures engaged in a mechanical activity. A work of very large dimensions where robot-like workers are entangled. Their muscles and limbs are large, but they have small heads that strip them of the power of thought. Dull and dirty colors that indicate decay and rust in the painting's space.



**Fig 3.** «Robo and Meccano», oil paint and mixed media on chipboard, 1968. Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 47.

From the artist's remaining works, it can be said that his sculpture career began in the years 1966 and more seriously in 1968. His sculptures are similar to his paintings in both form and content. No source mentions how he was trained in sculpture. In 1969, Bahman Mohassess returned to Rome once again and until 1978, the time of the revolution, he was constantly traveling between Iran and Rome. His withdrawal, isolation, and constant travels were voluntary; however, one of the reasons for his trips to Italy was the bronze casting of his sculptures. In 1972, Mohassess created one of his most critical works. Although the commission came from government officials, Mohassess presented one of his most bitter works for the construction of the royal family's sculpture (Fig 4), and this criticism was related to the portrayal he made for the sculpture of the king and queen. Like all of Mohassess's sculptures, this sculpture was also cast in bronze in Italy, but it was never displayed in Iran because it did not receive the king's approval. Generally speaking, it can be said that in artistic works, the depiction of Iranian kings usually has an idealized form. With the arrival of Western concepts and the camera, the simulation of the king's face gradually became popular in the contemporary era; however, the fundamental condition for depicting the king's image has always been its grandeur and formality. From this perspective, Mohassess's sculpture can be considered a completely different, unique, and critical representation of the king and his family in the history of Iranian art.



**Fig 4.** «Royal Family», bronze, 250×300×150 cm, 1972.  
Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 58.



**Fig 5.** «Flute Player», bronze, 200 cm, 53-1352.  
Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 62.



**Fig 6.** «Two Wrestlers», bronze, 130 cm, 1975.  
Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 70.

Among the other sculptures that had a tragic fate, we can mention the sculpture of the flute player (Fig 5). Mohassess constructed it in 1974-1975 at the request of the «Tehran Theater City» complex. The sculpture, inspired by the character «Faunus», was named «Flute Player» and was cast in bronze at a height of 2 meters. The installation of this sculpture faced problems from the very beginning due to its blatant nudity. The contrast between the enchanting and somewhat demonic sound of the flute player with those horns in a society that considered the flute a sacred and prophetic instrument was revolutionary for modern Iranian art. The small and narrow base of this sculpture, while serving a visual function, also has a symbolic meaning. The flute player, trapped in isolation and separated from his surroundings, emphasizes the concept of solitude even more in the cramped space tightly attached to the base. In many of the sculptures of the Mohassess, the feet are not placed on the base; rather, the feet sink into the base, or one could say that there are no feet for movement at all, and this itself conveys a sense of captivity. In 1975, Mohassess created a bronze sculpture of two wrestlers (Fig 6) for the «Tehran Olympic Stadium» complex (Azadi Stadium). The sculpture was designed in such a way that the sun could be seen in the negative space between the two figures. This work, despite being customized, still contained the artist's thoughts and personal perspective. For example, under the pretext of the struggle and conflict between two wrestling figures, Mohassess had once again emphasized the concepts of antagonism and confrontation. The figures in this work also had small, bony heads and limbs up to the wrists, which themselves indicated a lack of intelligence and capability. The sculpture of the «Minotaur» in Fig 7, with its thin, emaciated, and lifeless body, shows no sign of the legendary Minotaur's power. The overt display of the Minotaur's masculinity contrasts with the weakness and hunched posture of the figure. In Fig 8, the sculpture of the «Warrior with Shield» also highlights the helplessness and despair of humanity. In fact, Mohassess emphasizes the warrior's helplessness more than anything by placing a shield in his hand. The absence of a natural head and eye signifies the subject's inability to recognize danger and the audience of war.



**Fig 7.** «Centaur», bronze. Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 231.



**Fig 8.** «Minotaur», bronze. Source: Mohassess, 2007, 54.



**Fig 9.** «Warrior with Shield», bronze. Source: Mohassess, 2007, 38.



**Fig 10.** «Tightrope Walker», bronze and steel, 300×350×500 cm, 1978. Source: Khalatbari, 2017, 76.

Mohassess left Iran in 1978, and many of his audience remained unaware of him for a long time. During this period, the artist distanced himself from previous subjects and chose more earthly themes. In some of Mohassess's works from this period, the emptiness of the characters is depicted more intensely. For example, in Fig 9 of the «bust» sculpture, the figure is nothing but a layer of skin. One could say that the existential reality of a human in Mohassess's works is nothing but an empty shell. In the early 1370s (Solar calendar), Mohassess returned to Iran. During these years, he was plagued by lung cancer, asthma, and intestinal diseases. He destroyed a large part of his work during this period. In the second published book of his collection in Italy, the artist mentions that he destroyed about fifty

works. After that, Mohassess packed up again and left Iran for the last time. We witness his collage works in the last years of Mohassess's life. His last collection of sculptures was created around 1993, and after that, due to old age, illness, and excessive isolation, we have not seen any remarkable artistic works from him. In 2007, corresponding to 1386 in the Solar Calendar, a collection of Mohassess's works showcasing six decades of his artistic life, was published in Italy in a thousand copies. On Wednesday, July 20, 2010, Bahman Mohassess passed away in Italy due to a respiratory illness at the «Sacconi» hotel (Khalatbari, 2017, 80-100).

### Discussion

Bahman Mohassess was born and raised in a noble and aristocratic family. The city of Rasht, where Mohassess was born and raised, also held a favorable position. After immigrating, Mohassess achieved contemporary approaches to understanding artistic issues in Rome, dedicating all his time to the quietly forming perspective within him. In the 1940s (Solar calendar), the Iranian government undertook numerous actions in various economic and cultural fields. The acquisition of more experience by artists, along with the recognition and acceptance of this by society, led to a more significant expansion of modern art compared to before. Additionally, artistic and cultural movements, as well as institutions and centers, increased in Iran, and artists gained a favorable position. With the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution, committed art emerged, and the audience for this type of art increased due to the prevailing atmosphere in society, while the community rejected modern art. After Iraq attacked Iran and during the years of war, art with political, religious, and epic themes also had a large audience in society. At this time, Mohassess was on the decline of modernism. In condemning the Indigenous art in the documentary film «The Eye That Listens», he called it «brazen social flattery». This behavior of his and his attack on national thoughts also became another reason for others to label Mohassess as Westernized. Like the half-humans he created, he was alone. It can be said that the aim of Bahman Mohassess's artworks is to depict the condition of humanity in the contemporary world. In Mohassess's portraits and figures, the facelessness, lack of limbs, transformation of faces and bodies, head positions, and postures are signs of the helpless and powerless state of humans in the modern world, as well as a critique of this condition. In his works from the 1940s and 1950s (Solar Calendar), Bahman Mohassess depicted humans as animal-like or, conversely, animals as human-like, reminding us of the loss of human identity and dehumanization. These works were not created for the sake of aesthetics or to produce mythical paintings and sculptures; rather, their purpose was to demonstrate the reduction of humanity in the modern era. In all these works, there is a sense of disgust towards the pre-modern state of Iran and a fear of the thoughtless human in the modern world; the disgust that turns into despair and the dream of destroying the current situation. Bahman Mohassess presents the idea of abandoning and destroying everything we currently are by rejecting a return to tradition and the past, with the presence of despair and frustration with the current situation more than any other aspect. In Mohassess's view, confronting man with himself is a way to transform the absurd condition of the present human. In fact, the empty screams, dull and muddy colors, and futile stares in his works reflect the despair and helplessness of humanity regarding its own condition, which is revealed to the viewer like a mirror. The concept of isolation can be found as one of the fundamental components in Bahman Mohassess's

works, which he has emphasized in various and numerous ways. If we want to explore the reasons for the presence of this concept in the artist's works, we must pay attention to two factors: internal and external factors. Internal and psychological factors, alongside external factors such as the artist's family and their social status, the artist's social conditions, and their contemporary world, influence the formation of Mohassess's intellectual trend and perspective, as well as the application of exclusive concepts in his works. Mohassess never criticizes himself in his works. He has appeared in a position as an omniscient being, which has led to his distancing from society and his isolation. A society that, in his view, is entirely filled with ignorance, folly, and irrationality. On the other hand, the lack of art education at that time and the weak background of modern art in Iran set the stage for the artist's lack of attention, understanding, and even differentiation and isolation. This isolation ultimately leads to silence and then the destruction of his works.

### Conclusion

The social context influencing the formation of Bahman Mohassess's artistic habits was his family background, which naturally created a particular distinction for individuals of this class. Access to distinguished facilities, including higher and modern education inside or outside Iran, was one of these positional advantages. Nevertheless, it can be said that this class benefited from all three forms of capital: cultural capital (higher and modern education), economic capital (land ownership and being landlords), and social capital (due to being Qajar). Thus, the family tree of the esteemed Mohassess family clearly demonstrates the prominent position of this aristocratic family in the field of power. Therefore, this set of circumstances led Mohassess to distinguish himself from others and to develop a lifestyle and work habits that were markedly different from his contemporaries. His immigration and numerous travels to the West in later years also contributed to and intensified his distinctiveness. In fact, he followed the same path that Western artists had taken; artists who wanted to play the most significant role in raising contemporary humans' awareness of their modern identity. However, the interaction of this class with Westerners caused them to distance themselves from society, as the entirety of society was alien to these matters. When he went to Tehran and became acquainted with the Tudeh Party and a group of prominent writers and artists, his works gradually took on a new perspective. In this new situation, Mohassess was considered a modern artist whose works had their own specific audience. Thus, he gained power in the artistic field. This situation becomes more apparent when Mohassess's position in the field of power, namely the political field, is also taken into account. With the rise of the Tudeh Party and Mohassess's proximity to this party, his position in the field of power was elevated. As a result, in the second phase of his career, Mohassess changed his status in the field of power and also in the artistic field, gaining the position of an avant-garde artist. The reflection of this change in Mohassess's status can be observed in his stances towards other artists. Mohassess's indifference towards other artists is, in fact, a sign of the replacement of new art with traditional art, which upset traditional artists. Naturally, under these circumstances, despite having a dominant position in the artistic field, Mohassess gradually found himself in a position dominated by the field of power, and this contradictory class position made him deeply resentful and isolated. It can be said that one of the reasons for his emigration was precisely these contradictions being overlooked. The years Mohassess spent outside of Iran allowed him to distance himself

from others as much as possible, and his aesthetic approach took its definitive shape in light of the new teachings he encountered in the West. In fact, Mohassess gradually lost his position in the field of power throughout his life, but he achieved a respectable standing in the field of art. The source of Mohassess's power in the field of art can be traced to the extent of his cultural capital; the capitals that determined his prominent position in this field. These capitals include Mohassess's specialized knowledge in artistic and literary fields, which he acquired inside and outside Iran. Language also became a window through which Mohassess could establish a powerful connection with Western art. By drawing from these endless resources, Mohassess could violate the prevailing rules of the Iranian art field and embark on a new construction of it. Undoubtedly, the quality and quantity of Mohassess's cultural capital were incomparable to the cultural capital of ordinary people and audiences of his works, and in this regard, he could not be placed in the same category as them. Therefore, he distanced himself from them as much as possible, rejected and criticized them, and produced new art in the opposite category. Thus, an independent pole of the art field in which he resided was formed. This field was distinguished as a separate realm with its own specific rules from other fields. The social factors influencing the level of acceptance of Bahman Mohassess's artworks by the audience were the relationships of this class with Westerners, which distanced them from society because the majority of the community was alienated from these relationships. On the other hand, the social status of some members of this family, as well as the historical events of that time and the changing structure of society, gradually diminished the credibility of this class, leading to their isolation. During the period when Mohassess moved to Tehran and became acquainted with the Tudeh Party and prominent figures, his works gradually changed. With the rise of the Tudeh Party and Mohassess's closeness to this party, his position in the power arena was elevated. In this timeframe, Mohassess was considered a modern art artist whose works had their own specific audience. So, he gained power in the artistic field as well. Thus, in the second phase of his career, Mohassess was an influential and advancing artist who held a desirable position both in the political field and in the field of art. However, this situation was short-lived, and with Mohassess's disregard for other artists, this power also diminished because Mohassess was striving to replace traditional art with new art, and this effort was particularly unpleasant for the older generation, as they were unwilling to lose their power. Therefore, it is understandable that Mohassess would complain about his surroundings or that his surroundings would call him «Westernized». Naturally, under these circumstances, despite having a favorable and growing position in the artistic field, Mohassess did not have a powerful value and status in the political and social fields, and this contradictory class position made him extremely resentful and isolated. The years Mohassess spent outside of Iran increased the distance between him and the Iranian society and his audience within the country; this furthered his isolation. Undoubtedly, the quality and quantity of Mohassess's cultural capital were vastly different from the cultural capital of ordinary people and his audience. For this reason, he could not align himself with them, and this issue distanced them as much as possible. On the one hand, this lack of understanding troubled Mohassess, and given his particular disposition, he drove away and scolded the audience with his sharp words and behavior and turned to his work in solitude. Thus, this also became a reason for the dispersion of his audience after his immigration. Despite the government's support for art and artists in the 1940s (Solar calendar), due to the sharpness of Mohassess's works, they did not appeal to the aristocracy, and on the other hand, because of their sarcasm and

incomprehensibility to the general public, they did not resonate with the traditional society's mindset. In other words, his valuable art did not have the external audience it deserved. Ultimately, Mohassess's wandering in this field led to producing a type of art that was valuable and pure but did not have the external audience it deserved. The field of art production was his ultimate goal. The logic of action in this field dictates that agents, unlike in the economic field, do not seek profit from their actions. The ideal state of this situation is when the artist is their own only audience, like artists who destroy their works after creation. Mohassess is also an excellent sample of an artist who destroyed more than fifty of his own works. This situation indicates the artist's greatest attachment to the center of art production. In this case, the artist loves the essence of art and distinguishes it from economic action. This is what makes them lose the game to win it ultimately. This is the rule of the artistic field. The path of Mohassess's life shows that he sacrificed everything for art. He never turned to another profession until he completed his mission. After the Islamic Revolution, modernist artists either left Iran or refrained from artistic work for a long time. Some even changed their style. In these circumstances, Mohassess was one of the artists who did not change his style or stop working; instead, he emigrated and continued to create his works in isolation and silence.

## Author Contributions

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The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

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