

PARVIZ TANAVOLI

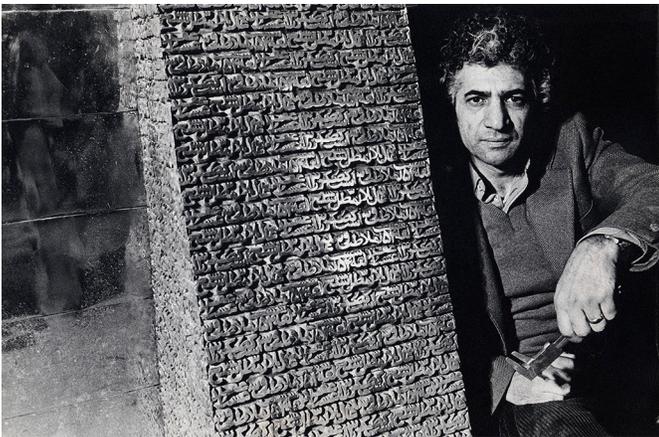
POETS, LOCKS, CAGES

TEACHER STUDY GUIDE
FALL 2023

Vancouver
Artgallery

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	PROGRAM INFORMATION AND GOALS
6	GLOSSARY
8	ABOUT THE EXHIBITION
10	A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO IRAN
11	WHAT IS ABSTRACT ART? A SHORT REVIEW
12	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITIES
14	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #1: WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?
19	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #2: THE SHAPE OF ME
22	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #3: FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURES
25	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #4: WORDS AS ART
28	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #5: CAGES
30	PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY #6: THE POET
33	FURTHER LEARNING TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES



“A verse of poetry sometimes follows me for days and days. I live with it. And when I go to the studio of course these thoughts do not disappear—Persian art, Persian poetry, the pictures I have seen. Even the scenery of everyday life—the bazaar, the people. It stays with me.”

- Parviz Tanavoli

VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages is the first major exhibition in Canada devoted to the works of Iranian-born, Vancouver-based artist Parviz Tanavoli. The exhibition presents his life in art through a display of over one hundred of his paintings and sculptures. Made between the early 1960s and the 2010s, they encapsulate his singular style and introduce us to his world, one full of poetry and one that speaks to his passion for the cultural history and traditions of Iran.

DEAR TEACHER,

This teaching guide will assist you in preparing your class tour of the exhibition *Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages*. It provides activities to facilitate discussion before and after your school tour.

Engaging in the suggested activities will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require very few materials and can be easily adapted to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Glossary section.

Please note that today some consider the word "Persian" to be an old term that harkens back to the former days of monarchy, but the term still has cultural value and relevance. Thus, "Iran" is used in the context of political discussion, while both "Iran" and "Persia" are used in cultural context.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages take place on the unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

THE TOUR OF *PARVIZ TANAVOLI: POETS, LOCKS, CAGES* HAS THREE MAIN GOALS:

1

TO INTRODUCE

PARVIZ TANAVOLI'S WORK AND THE
IRANIAN CULTURAL HISTORY THAT INSPIRES IT

2

TO CONSIDER

KEY THEMES WITHIN THE EXHIBITION SUCH AS POET, LOCK, CAGE

3

TO EXPLORE

INDIVIDUAL ARTWORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDEAS,
TECHNIQUES AND PROCESS



Installation view of *Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages*, exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, July 1 to November 19, 2023

GLOSSARY

"Iran is a land of great love stories."

- **Parviz Tanavoli**

ABSTRACTION: A style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

1. The artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
2. The artist creates purely abstract forms with lines, shapes or colours that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

ASSEMBLAGE: A form of sculpture created from "found" objects arranged in such a way that they create a new artwork.

CALLIGRAPHY: The art of beautiful handwriting. It is a unique feature of Islamic art in that it has been used in varied and imaginative ways. The written word appears not just in pen and paper but across all art forms and materials, including architecture and sculpture.

CONTEMPORARY ART: Artwork that has been created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists. Challenging traditional boundaries, many contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today's world. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its rejection of historical definitions of what constitutes art.

FOLK ART: An activity such as painting, music or dancing that expresses something about the lives and feelings of everyday people in a particular group or country, especially those living in the countryside.

HEECH: The literal translation of this Persian word is "nothing," however, there are philosophical meanings to the word. In Sufism, heech is a metaphor signifying a variety of concepts, such as the dissolution of ego, the unity of all things through nothingness and accepting one's nothingness as a way to acknowledge God's existence.

ICONOGRAPHY: The visual images and symbols used in a work of art or the study or interpretation of these.

ISLAMIC ART: This term not only describes the art created specifically in service of the Muslim faith (for example, a mosque and its furnishings) but also characterizes the art and architecture historically produced in the lands ruled by Muslims, produced for Muslim patrons or created by Muslim artists. As it is not only a religion but a way of life, Islam fostered the development of a distinctive culture with its own unique artistic language that is reflected in art and architecture throughout the Muslim world.

GLOSSARY CONTINUED

MODERNIST/MODERN(ISM): A historical period of art practice from 1850 to 1970, when approaches to art embraced new ideas in science, political thought and many other areas. The modernists rejected the restrictions of past art traditions and stressed innovation over all other values.

MOTIF: A repeated pattern, image, or theme. Many designs in mosques in Islamic culture are motifs.

NEO-TRADITIONAL ART: A contemporary art movement that draws on traditional styles and techniques but also incorporates modern elements and ideas.

POP ART: A movement that emerged in the 1950s and flourished in the 60s in America and Britain, drawing inspiration from sources in popular and commercial culture. Different cultures and countries contributed to the movement during the 1960s and 70s.

SAQQAKHANEH SCHOOL/MOVEMENT: A neo-traditional style of art that derives inspiration from Iranian folk art and culture. The movement is recognized as the first school of Iranian modern art. This school was a significant movement.

SUFISM: A term that refers to the varied mystical traditions of Islam. Many different religions have their own mystical traditions, which emphasize an inward, direct experience of the Divine.

UNCEDDED: A term for a relationship between the government of Canada and Indigenous people when no treaties have been established. In general, "unceded" means the lands and waters of the Indigenous people were never surrendered and were taken without permission.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

PARVIZ TANAVOLI: POETS, LOCKS, CAGES

"I think I was very fortunate that I was born in a country that was so rich in art and in poetry."

– Parviz Tanavoli

Since the 1960s, Parviz Tanavoli has maintained a creative practice that combines modern and contemporary art approaches with traditional Persian forms and Islamic iconography. Considered the father of modern Iranian sculpture, Parviz Tanavoli was one of the founders of the Saqqakhaneh movement. The Saqqakhaneh movement is recognized as the first school of Iranian modern art, with its associated painters and sculptors incorporating elements from Iranian folk art into their creations. Tanavoli's practice stems from his interest in Iranian culture and tradition.

Poets, Locks, Cages was conceived in response to internationally celebrated artist Parviz Tanavoli's relatively unacknowledged presence in the Pacific Northwest and across Canada. The exhibition is the first and most significant presentation of Tanavoli's work in the country, bringing together over one hundred major artworks from the early 1960s to present day. The exhibition spans the full breadth of Parviz Tanavoli's inventive practice as a truly multidisciplinary artist, focusing on sculpture, painting, printmaking and mixed media assemblage.

Poets, Locks, Cages examines the key themes of the Poet, the Lock and the Cage that have occupied the artist throughout his six-decade career. The exhibition also brings together a large display of the rarely seen *Wonders of the Universe* series from the artist's own collection. This major work consists of a series of lyrical paintings on the unbound

pages of antique books Tanavoli discovered at a bazaar in Tehran. Tanavoli, who has lived in Vancouver for over thirty years while also maintaining a studio in Iran, created *Wonders of the Universe* in his Horseshoe Bay studio, decades after finding the antique books in Tehran. Inspired by the long nights of Vancouver's winters, the works link the scenery of Vancouver and the Howe Sound with ancestral figures from Persia's legendary histories, integrating the past into the present.

Poets, Locks, Cages reveals Parviz Tanavoli to be a true poet-artist deeply inspired by the work of celebrated Persian poets. Tanavoli, who considers his work to be "sculptural poetry," crafts a language of rich visual symbolism that is entirely his own. As a poet, he creates the inner and outer worlds he sees through the visual languages of cultural tradition and progress. His cages both protect and expose; his locks both close and open. His artworks both celebrate and warn in a continuing sculptural display of resistance and persistence.

Parviz Tanavoli's work is held in more international museums than that of any other living Iranian artist. *Poets, Locks, Cages* includes important international loans from several prestigious collections, displaying Parviz Tanavoli's deep engagement with Persian folkloric traditions, poetry and literature, and his lasting impact on modernist art in Iran.



Installation view of *Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages*, exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, July 1 to November 19, 2023

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO IRAN

HISTORY

Iran is one of the oldest nations in the world, with a history dating back tens of thousands of years. The country's first great city, Susa, was built on the central plateau around 3200 BCE.

In 559 BCE, the Persian Empire arose in southwestern Iran and conquered the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. The empire eventually extended from the Mediterranean Sea to what is now Pakistan, but was conquered by the Greeks in 330 BCE.

Around 260 BCE, nomads called Parni ousted the Greeks and ruled in the region for some 500 years. The Sassanids came into power in 224 CE and in 642 CE Persia became part of the Islamic Empire. In 1501, the kings, or shahs, of the Safavid Empire began their rule.

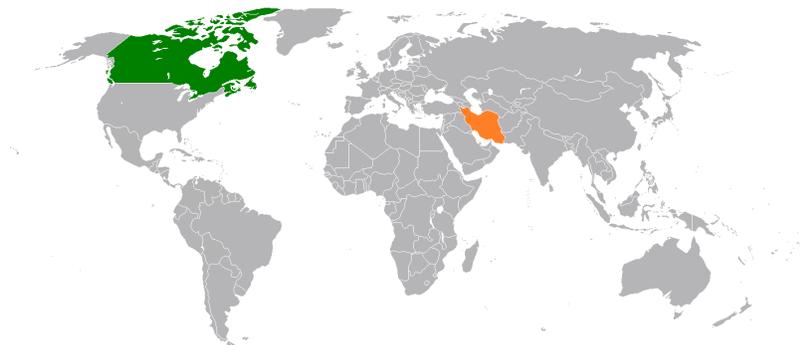
In the late eighteenth century, foreign powers, including Russia and Britain, took control of parts of Persia. In 1921, a Persian army officer named Reza Khan took control and sought to end outside influence. In 1935, he renamed the country Iran. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, became shah in 1941.

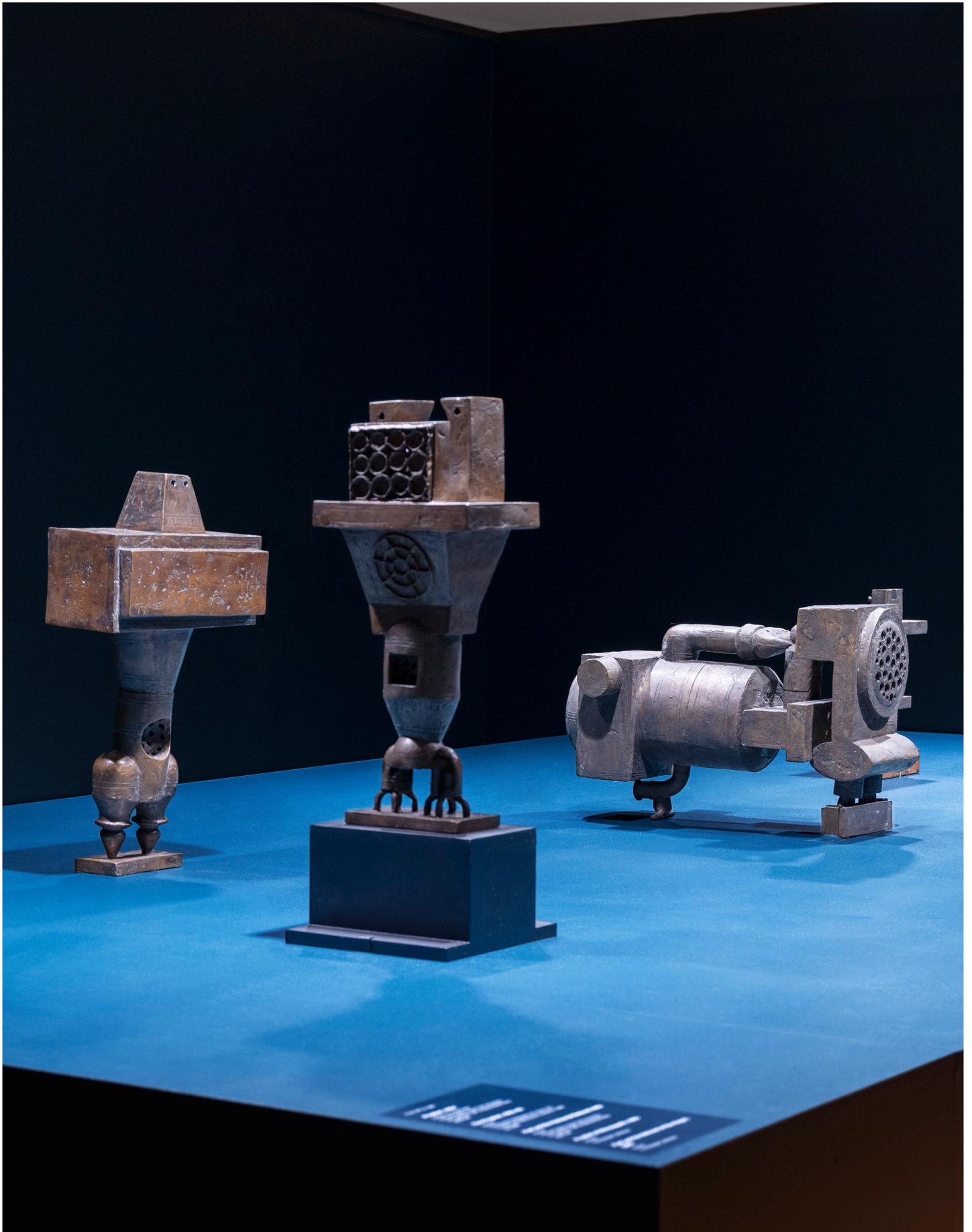
In 1979, many Iranians who felt Pahlavi was corrupt forced him to flee, ending the reign of the shahs in Iran. Since then, religious leaders have ruled the country. The first was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose ten years in power were marked by a long war with Iraq and tensions with the United States and many other nations. Khomeini died in 1989, but much of that tension still exists today.

PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Strong religious beliefs have been part of Iranians' lives for thousands of years. Almost all Iranians are Muslim, or followers of Islam. The religion is central to daily life.

Iran has a long history of scholarship that has created a rich culture of art, literature, poetry, music, cuisine and architecture. Ancient Iranian thinkers wrote influential texts on philosophy and medicine, and it was an Iranian mathematician who invented algebra. Iran's universities are among the most respected in the Middle East.

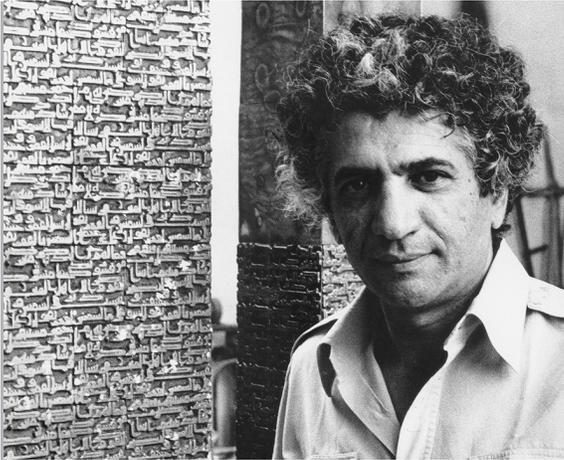




Installation view of *Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages*, exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, July 1 to November 19, 2023

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITIES

GRADE 2 – GRADE 12



1. ALL AGES | WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?

Pre-Tour Activity



2. ALL AGES | THE SHAPE OF ME

Pre-Tour Activity



3. ALL AGES | FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURES

Pre-Tour Activity



**4. ALL AGES |
WORDS AS ART**
Pre-Tour Activity



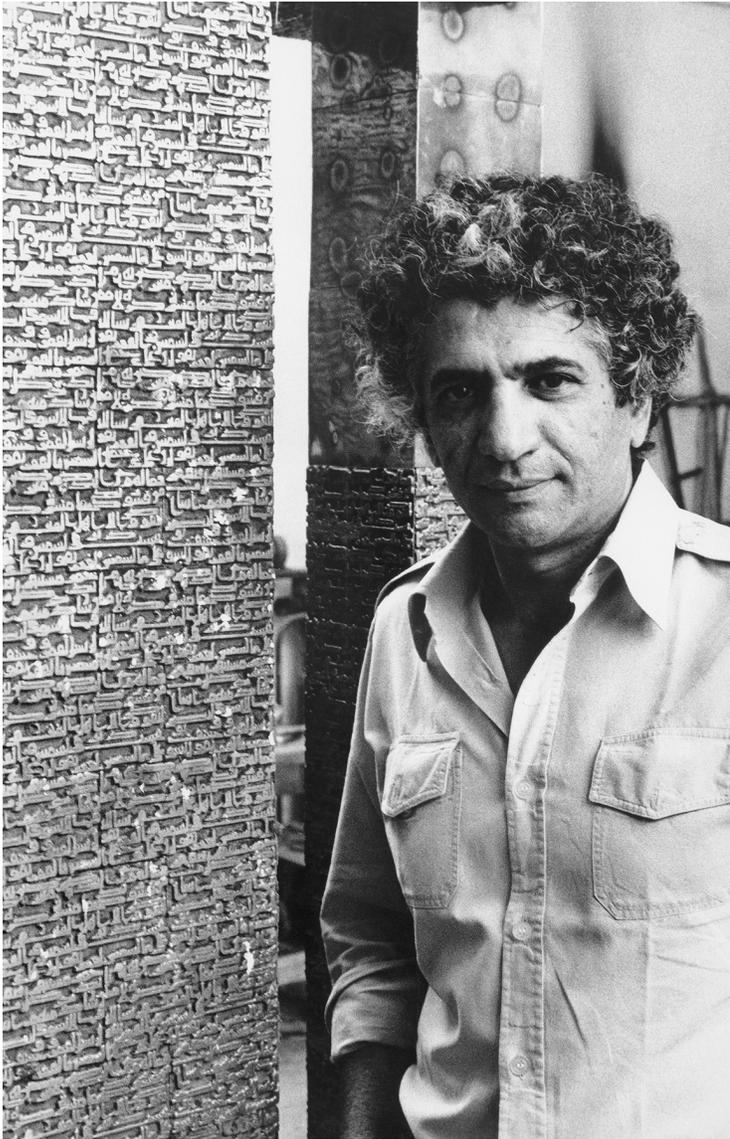
**5. ALL AGES |
CAGES**
Pre-Tour Activity



**6. ALL AGES |
THE POET**
Pre-Tour Activity

ALL AGES | WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



OBJECTIVE

Introduce students to the life, artistic process and works of Iranian-Canadian contemporary artist Parviz Tanavoli.

MATERIALS

- Writing materials
- Access to the internet
- Artist Information Sheet (p. 17) and the Student Worksheet (p. 18)

PROCESS

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Give each group one of the categories from the Artist Information Sheet (p. 17) and ask them to consider what they need to find out to complete their section.
- Have them conduct research using the internet, either at home or at school.
- Ask each group to find and describe a piece of work by the artist and add it into the space provided on the worksheet.
- Have each group present their information while the rest of the students fill in their worksheets.

CONCLUSION

Discuss the following:

- What were some of the most interesting things that students learned or discovered?
- Which works are students curious to see in the exhibitions?
- Do the artist's works connect to, or resonate with, the student's lives? Why or why not?
- What else are students interested in finding out about the artist?

Parviz Tanavoli in his Zal-e Zar studio, Tehran, 1964, Courtesy of the Artist

ALL AGES | WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

"I like to be the ambassador for the culture of my country."

—Parviz Tanavoli

Born in Iran in 1937, Parviz Tanavoli is widely acknowledged as the father of modern Iranian sculpture, but his six-decade career also includes painting, printmaking, ceramics, rugs and jewellery. Throughout his career, he has also embraced many roles beyond that of an artist. He is known as a writer, scholar, art advisor and collector. These roles, he explains, "are so interwoven, I can hardly separate them from each other." He is a visionary teacher who is convinced that "inside every individual is a seed of creativity."

His love of collecting began in his early childhood with bottle caps. From there he began collecting locks, admiring their beauty as well as the ingenuity of their designs. He would play with and repair locks that had no keys, fascinated by their secretive inner mechanisms: "When I was a child, locks were my only toys." Today, as a highly regarded collector, Tanavoli is known for both his odd and rare items. Particularly well known are his collections of antique Persian metalwork, such as locks and jewellery, as well as his collections of antique kohl containers and contemporary Iranian art. He has also dedicated himself to the study and collection of Persian textiles, specifically Iranian nomad carpets, rugs and kilims. Since the early days of his career, some of his artworks have included collections of everyday objects and a variety of found junkyard treasures. His love for these found objects started when he was a child.

He says that, at the age of sixteen, his "life changed forever" when he encountered the works of poet Rumi for the first time. "Rumi," says Tanavoli, "was my first mentor." In fact, Tanavoli thought he would grow up to be

a poet because, when he was a child, there was no school for sculpture in Iran. In 1952, when the Tehran School of Arts opened a sculpture program for the first time, Tanavoli was the first to enrol in and later graduate from the program. He then went on to study in Italy on two different occasions: first in Carrara, because he had read about the famous Italian sculptor, Michelangelo, carving Carrara marble; and then in Milan, where his teacher inspired him to explore his own cultural heritage and search for a style that could express Persia's past achievements in a new, modern way. By the age of twenty-two, he was invited to some of the world's largest art exhibitions in Paris, Venice and Carrara.

When he returned to Iran in 1959, Tanavoli taught sculpture for the newly established College of Decorative Arts and began building a body of work that sourced material from classical Persian literature, folk art, Islamic traditions and calligraphy. Some of his first sculptures were of birds and animals he had seen at archaeological museums, but then he remembered a sculptor that appears in an ancient Persian love story: Farhad the Mountain Carver. Farhad was a young sculptor who worked in the court of King Khosrow II and was hopelessly in love with an Armenian princess named Shirin. Although Farhad appears in Persian books and poems primarily as a lover, Tanavoli wanted to see him as a sculptor: "I wanted him to be my ancestor, to be my Michelangelo. I didn't want Michelangelo to be my ancestor. I wanted Farhad to be." So Tanavoli made Farhad into a hero and began creating sculptures of him. He made sculptures without features, heads or hands, sculpting figures inspired by the architecture of his homeland in order to follow government rules. Throughout his career he has used variously sized geometric shapes, such as cubes and cylinders, to represent the human body, and he decorates their surfaces with words or entire lines of script so that they are "something more than mere geometrical shapes."

ALL AGES | WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

During this time, Tanavoli also established his first studio, Atelier Kaboud, which became a meeting place for artists to exchange ideas and make grand plans for the future of art in Iran. The studio was the birthplace of the Saqqakhaneh school, of which Tanavoli is one of the founders. Tanavoli explains, "Saqqakhaneh is a general term related to the spiritual pop art of Iran, meaning the art created by ordinary people, such as the art in Iran's bazaars, which is very expressive." Atelier Kaboud was also where Tanavoli conceived the groundbreaking idea to establish a museum. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1977.

In the early 1960s, Tanavoli was invited to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design as a visiting artist. Upon his return, Tanavoli helped establish the Sculpture Department at the University of Tehran, where he taught for eighteen years until his retirement in 1979.

A sense of wonder informs the work of Parviz Tanavoli. Throughout his life, he has developed and revisited a symbolic vocabulary that springs directly from the depth of his love and fascination for the cultures of Iran, including shrine grilles, padlocks, walls, birds, hands, tools, poets, lions, cypress trees and "heech." Poetry has been one of the major inspirations for Tanavoli's work since the early 1960s. When he has a creative block, Tanavoli leaves his art and delves into the art of others. He walks in nature, listens to music and, most often, reads the works of the Persian Muslim poet Rumi, which changed Tanavoli's life forever when he was a teen. He took on the challenge of creating, almost from scratch, a vocabulary of modern sculpture for Iran.

His work is held in more international museums than any other living Iranian artist. Through his work as a teacher and mentor, Tanavoli has influenced hundreds of younger artists, particularly in Iran. Today, Parviz Tanavoli spends his time between Tehran and Vancouver and he has a studio in both places.

ALL AGES | WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

ARTIST INFORMATION SHEET

PERSONAL INFORMATION

- Born in 1937 and raised in Iran
- His love of collecting began in his early childhood, and he is known for both his odd and rare collection items
- His six-decade career includes sculpture, painting, printmaking, ceramics, rugs and jewellery
- Throughout his career he has embraced many roles beyond that of an artist, including teacher, scholar and writer
- He spends his time between Tehran and Vancouver and has a studio in both places

EDUCATION

- He was first to enrol in, and later graduate from, the Tehran School of Arts sculpture program
- He studied sculpture in Carrara and Milan, Italy
- He has a deep interest in Iranian cultures and traditions
- At the age of sixteen he discovered the works of the Persian poet Rumi, who became his first mentor
- Atelier Kaboud, which he established, was a meeting place for artists to exchange ideas and plans for art in Iran

ART PROCESSES AND INFLUENCES

- He is deeply inspired by Persian poetry
- Poets, locks and cages have been among the major motifs of his work since the 1960s
- His practice stems from his interest in Iranian culture and tradition
- The ancient Persian story of Farhad, the sculptor, is central to his work
- He uses found and reclaimed objects in his work
- His sculptures use cubes and cylinders inspired by Iranian architecture to represent the human body, and he decorates the surfaces with words and script

ACHIEVEMENTS

- He is acknowledged as the father of modern Iranian sculpture
- He is one of the founders of the Saqqakhaneh art movement, which is recognized as the first school of Iranian modern art
- By the age of twenty-two, he was invited to some of the world's largest art exhibitions
- His work is held in more international museums than any other living Iranian artist
- He is a visionary teacher who believes inside every individual is a seed of creativity

ALL AGES | WHO IS PARVIZ TANAVOLI?

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

STUDENT WORKSHEET (FILL IN THE CHART WITH THE FOLLOWING)

PERSONAL INFORMATION	
EDUCATION	
ART PROCESSES AND INFLUENCES	
ACHIEVEMENTS	
AN ARTWORK	

ALL AGES | THE SHAPE OF ME

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



ALL AGES | THE SHAPE OF ME

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

"I would have loved to be a poet, but I am a sculptor. But my sculptures are a kind of poetry."

—Parviz Tanavoli

OBJECTIVE

Learn more about the main themes of Parviz Tanavoli's practice and create a self-portrait inspired by Tanavoli's sculpture *Poet in Love* (2012).

DISCUSSION

Parviz Tanavoli is deeply inspired by the Persian poems and literature he enjoys. One of the main themes of his sculptures is the Poet. The Poet symbolizes all Persian poets and appears in all manner of shapes, forms and materials. It can be accompanied by other elements such as locks and cages. The Poet is "the annunciator of freedom, peace and love," explains Tanavoli.

He also draws inspiration for his works from one of his favourite pre-Islamic stories, Farhad the Mountain Carver, a tale about a young sculptor who worked in the court of King Khosrow II (reign: 590–628). Hopelessly in love with a princess promised to the king, Farhad is given an impossible task by the king: carve through the mountain to win the love of the princess. When the king realizes that Farhad might actually complete the challenge, he sends a messenger to fool Farhad into thinking the princess has died. Heartbroken, Farhad dies, and not long afterwards, sculpture in Iran ends for centuries. Many of Tanavoli's Poet pieces pay tribute to the legendary story of Farhad: the only sculptor mentioned in classical Persian poetry, the only sculptor Tanavoli could study and, the artist believes, the last sculptor before him in Iran.

Parviz Tanavoli identifies himself with Farhad and also sees himself as a "poet of sculpture." This is why curators

say that the Poet, as the main character of Tanavoli's practice, is also considered a self-portrait of the artist. Parviz Tanavoli is the Poet moving through the decades of his practice.

MATERIALS

- White cardstock (cut in half)
- Printer/sketching paper
- Pencil crayons
- Watercolours
- Paintbrushes
- Water container
- Examples of Parviz Tanavoli's Poets

PROCESS

- Look closely at the sculpture *Poet in Love* (2012) on (p. 19). What do you see? What shapes has Parviz Tanavoli used to create the work? What shapes do you find interesting? Why? What connections can you make between the title of the sculpture and the work?
- Tanavoli sees himself as a poet of sculpture, creating lyrical artworks inspired by the poetry and literature he loves. This is why his sculptures of the Poet are considered self-portraits. He identifies with Persian poets and characters from Persian poetry and legends like Farhad the Mountain Carver. Take a moment to think about how you see yourself. Are you a soccer player? A dancer? A reader? Do you have a favourite character from a book or show that shares the same characteristics as you? Write down your thoughts on a piece of paper.
- A self-portrait is an artwork of yourself. It documents how you see yourself or how you want others to perceive you. Think about how you can create a self-portrait using only shapes like the ones you looked at closely in Tanavoli's sculptures. Make a couple of quick sketches to work out your ideas on a piece of paper.

ALL AGES | THE SHAPE OF ME

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



- When you are satisfied with your sketch, take a piece of cardstock and lightly sketch your idea on the paper. Challenge yourself to fill the page with your shapes to create your self-portrait.
- Colour allows us to describe certain emotions, helps tell a story and can represent a person or group. As a class, choose a colour that you feel represents your class. Once you have decided on a colour, maybe you will want to pick one other colour in the same family to use. For example, if you picked blue, then perhaps you would use another cool colour, such as purple. If you picked red, maybe you will want to add another warm colour, like yellow or orange.
- Fill in your shapes with watercolour. Take excess water off your brush by pulling it across the lip of the water container so you do not get puddles on your paper. You will find you can change the strength of the colour by the ratio of water to paint that you use.
- When you have filled in your shapes, feel free to use a pencil crayon in the same colour to sharpen the edges of your shapes if you want.
- Title your work.

CONCLUSION

Display the artworks in the classroom. Place them together, side by side, to create one large image. Discuss the process and the finished works.

- Which elements did you use or consider from Parviz Tanavoli's sculptures?
- What was easy or hard about creating your artwork?
- What were some of the things you took into consideration while planning and creating your painting? Share the decisions you made.
- Where do you notice similarities and differences between the artworks created by your class?
- If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

ALL AGES | FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURES

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



Poet and the Beloved of the King II, 1963, bronze, The Manijeh Collection

ALL AGES | FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURES

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

“My art always has a taste of Iran.”

—Parviz Tanavoli

OBJECTIVE

Inspired by Parviz Tanavoli’s career of creating sculpture in new, modern ways, understand how everyday objects can become works of art.

DISCUSSION

Parviz Tanavoli is referred to as the father of modern Iranian sculpture. Filling a thousand-year gap in Iran as a sculptor, he has worked very hard to find a way to create modern art using traditional Iranian cultural heritage.

In 1960, Parviz Tanavoli opened his studio Atelier Kaboud in south Tehran. He found artistic inspiration on his daily walks through the surrounding neighbourhood with its traditional workshops and bazaars. In the bazaars, he watched craftsmen forging steel, creating ordinary objects whose surfaces were etched with beautiful designs. Tanavoli was very inspired by these objects, which were not intended to be art, made by ordinary people. On the streets, another strong visual influence was the architecture of Shiite devotional spaces, including the grill-like saqqakhaneh—a traditional drinking fountain which often has locks attached to it. “People who have wishes or problems go to the shrines and tie up a strip of their clothing or fasten a lock to the grille of the shrine hoping that they can unlock their problems and cure their sickness or disease,” explains Tanavoli, “so the lock has great significance in Persian culture.”

Inspiration was not only found around the neighbourhood surrounding the studio but also from the artists and intellectuals who met inside the studio to share ideas on the future of contemporary art in Iran. The studio

was the birthplace of the Saqqakhaneh art movement, recognized as the first school of Iranian modern art. The studio had a giant scrap-metal sculpture of a man embracing a deer displayed on the balcony, an example of Tanavoli’s practice of incorporating found objects from the neighbourhood into his sculptures, ceramics and paintings. In January 1957, when these artworks were exhibited, the works of a sculptor were shown for the first time in Iran.

At the same time, Tanavoli began collecting devotional objects and carpets. The resulting style, called “spiritual pop art” by some, often shocked the local audiences. In fact, his exhibition in 1965 incorporating found, everyday objects with his devotional objects and carpets had to be closed after just three days as crowds threatened to burn the gallery down.

Tanavoli’s sculptures have included welded faucets, tubes, knobs, grillwork and the keys and locks he has collected in small towns and local bazaars in Iran. Fused together, these found objects create the abstract figures he has become known for throughout his six-decade career. When there was no modern Iranian sculpture, Parviz Tanavoli invented one. His career has been marked with imagining new artistic horizons and creating new possibilities for studying, making and exhibiting Iranian art against all odds.

ALL AGES | FOUND OBJECT SCULPTURES

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

MATERIALS

- Wide array of found objects (paper rolls, bottle caps, other recycled and found materials)
- Glue and/or low-temperature hot glue gun
- Masking tape
- Scissors
- Poster board for sculpture base
- Plaster strips (optional)
- Paint (optional)
- *Poet and the Beloved of the King II* (1963) (p. 22)

PROCESS

- Look closely at Parviz Tanavoli's sculpture *Poet and the Beloved of the King II* (1963) on p. 22. What objects do you recognize? How did he use them?
- Collect interesting pieces of cardboard, packing materials, plastic containers, empty boxes and other found materials. You could even take a walk around your neighbourhood and find interesting natural objects!
- Play around with your found objects. You may want to cut some of the pieces. How do your objects go

together? What can you make? When you have a good idea of what you want your sculpture to look like, glue or tape together the larger pieces.

- Now attach the smaller pieces to your sculpture.
- As you put together your sculpture, you may want to add more items.
- When you are finished, you may want to plaster or paint your sculptures.

CONCLUSION

Display the sculptures in class. Discuss the process and the finished works.

- Which elements of Tanavoli's sculpture did you use or consider in your work?
- What was easy or hard about creating your sculpture?
- What were some of the things you took into consideration when building your artwork?
- What similarities and differences do you notice between the artworks on display?
- If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?



Student examples

ALL AGES | WORDS AS ART

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

"Heech, to me, is one word that tells the whole story of humanity."

—Parviz Tanavoli

OBJECTIVE

Create an abstract word drawing inspired by Parviz Tanavoli's work *Heech and Hands* (1965).

DISCUSSION

By the 1960s, Parviz Tanavoli saw that there were so many Iranian artists making calligraphic paintings, he decided to limit himself to one word alone—heech—in protest. Heech is the Persian word for "nothingness." The idea of heech, or "nothingness," came to him in the quiet of his studio, Atelier Kaboud. Since 1965, it is the only word that has appeared in Tanavoli's work. *Heech and Hands* is Tanavoli's first artwork incorporating the word. It consists of a plastic circle enclosing a neon heech written in Persian script. Plaster-cast hands grip a saqqakhaneh-inspired grill. "Any Iranian could easily read this," he says. "It's composed of three letters: H; then the centre part is like I or double E; this curve is like CH at the end."

Tanavoli has created hundreds of works incorporating heech during his career—in ceramic, bronze, fibreglass and even neon—placing the word in different positions and forms. On paper, the heech is a slender piece of calligraphy that's popular in Persian poetry. In poetry, heech has a bigger meaning: when a person finds truth, they reach nothingness, which translates to nirvana. "Heech has a rich story and a long history in our poetry and in our Sufism. It is not simply nothingness," explains Tanavoli.

MATERIALS

- Printer paper
- Black marker
- Coloured markers

PROCESS

- Look closely at *Heech and Hands* (1965) on p. 26. Can you find the letters Parviz Tanavoli describes in the discussion? Where is the H? The I or double E? The CH? What else do you see?
- As a class, look at different typefaces on the computer. Do they look different? Why or why not? Do they suggest a different mood or tone of voice? Which style would you use to write "hello"? Or the word "love"?
- Choose a word that is important to you in the language of your choice.
- Write your word slowly and carefully on a piece of paper, in a larger size than you normally would. Think about the typefaces you just looked at. Are there any differences between writing this way and the way you normally would write the word?
- Look closely at the arrangement of the letters. Are there any characteristics of the letters you can emphasize? Can you exaggerate the curves? Do any letters repeat in a way that you can highlight? Is there any symmetry or pattern in the shape of the letters as they appear together?
- Play with stylizing the letters until you are happy. For example, connect letters together, stack them on top of each other or try writing them on a curved line. Think about some of the typefaces you have discussed—are there aspects of the designs that inspire you?

ALL AGES | WORDS AS ART

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



Heech and Hands, 1965, mixed media, The Manijeh Collection.

ALL AGES | WORDS AS ART

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

- When you are satisfied with your design, fold a piece of paper in half lengthwise.
- Write your stylized word lightly in pencil. Try to fill the page, but make sure the top of at least some of the letters touch the fold.
- Trace over your pencil lines with a black marker.
- Flip your folded paper over.
- Trace the word in black pen on this side. It will be backwards. If it is hard to see, place the paper on a window to see more easily.
- Unfold the paper and clean up any black lines.
- Fill in the shapes with colour and/or designs.

CONCLUSION

Display the artworks in class. Discuss the process and the finished works.

- Parviz Tanavoli has used the word heech in a variety of ways throughout his career. Can you think of different ways your word could now be used? Could it be a sculpture? Why or why not?
- Was it easy or hard to stylize your word? Why or why not?
- What were some of the things you took into consideration when creating your artwork?
- What similarities and differences do you notice between the artworks on display?
- Were you surprised you could manipulate a word into something else? Why or why not?
- If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

ALL AGES | CAGES

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

"My cages are homes of hope... I do not consider what I put in cages imprisoned, but preserved, made safe."

—Parviz Tanavoli

OBJECTIVE

Learn more about the importance of cages in Parviz Tanavoli's artworks and create a cage painting inspired by *Bird and Cage* (1967).

DISCUSSION

Parviz Tanavoli's cages draw many associations from poetry and architecture. When the cage appears as part of the body of the Poet, it forms a type of protective armour around the Poet's heart. In this presentation, the cage offers protection but also expresses the Poet's inescapable pursuit of creativity and the tumultuousness of the poetic impulse. In Sufi poetry, the Poet figure is often described as a restless, caged nightingale or other captive bird. Tanavoli's cages embody the essence of the Poet, composed from various literary symbols and metaphorical associations, while also referencing physical architectural forms and the caged birds commonly found in Iranian bazaars.

Tanavoli creates his cage-like forms from patterns of four or six small squares, inspired by the openings in buildings ranging from humble huts and ordinary homes to elaborate mosques. The cage's structure is representative of the grillwork found on public shrines and religious tombs, as well as the latticework used to decorate mosques.

MATERIALS

- Watercolour paper
- Pencil
- Ruler (optional)
- Permanent black marker (Sharpie)
- Paint
- Pencil crayons or ballpoint pen to outline when finished

PROCESS

- Look closely at *Bird and Cage* (1967) on p. 29. What do you see?
- Parviz Tanavoli sees his cages as homes for hope, places to keep things protected and safe. With a partner, discuss different ideas of what you would place in a cage to keep safe. What hopes would you place inside a cage to protect?
- Parviz Tanavoli creates his cage-like forms from patterns of four to six small squares. Design your cage using the same. Will you use four, five or six small squares?
- Sketch the cage lightly with a pencil. Draw big so you have lots of room to draw inside it.
- Think about all the ideas shared regarding what could be kept in the cage. Decide on an object or feeling you want to put inside your cage to protect.
- Draw your object inside the cage.
- With a permanent black marker, trace over the pencil lines of your cage.
- Paint the object of your picture.

CONCLUSION

Display the artworks in class. Discuss the process and the finished works.

- Which elements of Tanavoli's artwork did you use or consider in your work?
- What was easy or hard about creating your painting?
- What were some of the things you took into consideration when creating your work?
- What similarities or differences do you notice between the artworks on display?
- If you were to do the project again, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?

ALL AGES | CAGES

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



Bird and Cage, 1967, mixed media, The Tanavoli Family Collection

ALL AGES | THE POET

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY



"If you have to put a label on me, it would be poet,
because I like poetry."

—Parviz Tanavoli

OBJECTIVE

Learn the story of Farhad the Mountain Carver through the artwork *Fallen Poet* (1967) and create a poem in response.

DISCUSSION

The Fallen Poet is a depiction of Farhad the Mountain Carver, a figure from a tragic Persian folk tale of star-crossed lovers, written by the Persian poet Nezami Ganjavi (1141–1209). Farhad, a figure inspired by historical events, is a young sculptor in the court of Sasanian King Khosrow II around 590–628.

The tale of Farhad is one of Parviz Tanavoli's favorites. Farhad, in the famous Iranian poem, was a young sculptor who worked in the court of King Khosrow II. Farhad was in love with an Armenian princess named Shirin, who also happened to be the king's love interest.

Fallen Poet, 1967, ceramic (glazed earthenware), The Manijeh Collection

ALL AGES | THE POET

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

When Khosrow learned of Farhad's love for Shirin, he sent him to Mount Behistun and struck a deal. If Farhad could sculpt a tunnel through the mountain, he would be allowed to marry Shirin. For years, Farhad chiselled his way through unyielding rock. When it seemed he may actually complete the challenge, the king sent a messenger to fool Farhad into thinking that Shirin had died. Farhad, heartbroken, climbed to the summit of the mountain, fell off and died. Shirin was heartbroken when she learned of the sculptor's fate.

Farhad is a symbol of resistance, filled with the ambition to make the impossible possible. For Tanavoli, Farhad is his only predecessor in the history of sculpture in Iran. Through resurrecting the figure of Farhad, sculpting the Mountain Carver over and over again, Tanavoli began to see himself rising up to revive an art form that had been lost for over a thousand years, creating a new tradition of sculpture in Iran while finding his own unique voice.

MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil
- Drawing materials (optional)

PROCESS

- Take a closer look at the sculpture *The Fallen Poet* (1967). What do you see? How has Parviz Tanavoli portrayed Farhad? How has he created the sculpture?
- Discuss the tale of Farhad the Mountain Carver. Can you think of any other stories with a similar plot? Do you think it is possible the tale of Farhad may have inspired these stories? Why or why not?
- Persian poetry and literature are an important element in the practice of Parviz Tanavoli. When Tanavoli was

young, he thought he would grow up to be a poet. You will create a diamante poem about Farhad as your own poetic response to *The Fallen Poet* and the tale of Farhad the Mountain Carver. A diamante poem is seven lines in which the words create the shape of a diamond. This type of poem does not contain rhyming words. There are two basic types of diamante poems: an antonym (opposite) diamante or synonym (the same) diamante. Choose which one you want to do.

- **THE FIRST STEP** is to pick two nouns (person, place or thing). The nouns either have opposite or the same meaning, depending on what kind of diamante you decided to write. Because a diamante poem is diamond-like in form, it must begin and end with single words that form the top and bottom. Use the discussion above to inspire your poem. Consider the characters in the story or even Parviz Tanavoli's association with the story as a subject.
- **LINE TWO:** pick two adjectives that describe the noun in line one.
- **LINE THREE:** pick three verbs that end with "ing" and describe the noun in line one
- **LINE FOUR:** pick four nouns—the first two must relate to the noun in line one, and the second two will relate to the noun in line seven.
- **LINE FIVE:** pick three verbs that end with "ing" and describe the noun in line seven.
- **LINE SIX:** pick two adjectives that describe the noun in line seven.
- **LINE SEVEN:** this is the noun that is opposite in meaning to line one or the same in meaning as the noun in line one.
- When complete, write your poem neatly to create a diamond shape.
- If you want, create a drawing that represents your poem and incorporate your diamante as a design element.

ALL AGES | THE POET

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

Create a poem using your five senses. Imagine being Farhad, Shirin, the King or Parviz Tanavoli when answering the following questions.

- If I were _____
- I'd feel _____
- I'd hear _____
- I'd see _____
- I'd taste _____
- I'd touch _____

CONCLUSION

Display the artworks in class. Discuss the process and the finished works.

- Which elements of *The Fallen Poet* did you consider in your poem? Did you pick a different part of the tale to focus on or the same part as Parviz Tanavoli?
- Was it easy or hard creating your poem?
- What parts of the story of Farhad did you take into consideration?
- What similarities and differences do you notice in the poems created?
- Were you surprised you could create a poem inspired by an artwork and story? Why or why not?

ANTONYM DIAMANTE EXAMPLE:

Farhad
Driven Strong
Working Loving Dreaming
Chisel Mountain Crown Palace
Lying Conniving Ruling
Mean Sneaky
King

SYNONYM DIAMANTE EXAMPLE:

Farhad
Ambitious Prudent
Doing Banging Gruelling
Chisel Mountain Sculpture Iran
Drawing Building Creating
Dynamic Dedicated
Tanavoli

5 SENSES POETRY EXAMPLE:

Farhad
Sad
Noise
Dust
Chalk
Rock

FURTHER LEARNING

TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES

"Inside every individual is a seed of creativity."

—Parviz Tanavoli

BOOK

Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2023)

Ali Fuat Bilkan, *Tales from Rumi: Mathnawi Selections for Young Readers* (Tughra Books, 2008)

VIDEO

[Parviz Tanavoli: A Life's Journey](#)

[Parviz Tanavoli | TateShots](#)

WEBSITES

Parviz Tanavoli: Iranian Artist who Made Something out of Nothing <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/01/parviz-tanavoli-iranian-artist-made-something-nothing>

Abby Weed Grey and Parviz Tanavoli <https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/2015/12/2893/>

View From Tehran: A Discussion With Acclaimed Artist Parviz Tanavoli <https://www.tanavoli.com/news/view-from-tehran/>

Themes: Poet <https://www.tanavoli.com/about/themes/poet/>

Six Decades in the Making: Parviz Tanavoli's Retrospective at the Davis Museum <https://www.ibraaz.org/news/114>

History of Iran <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/geography/countries/article/iran#:~:text=Iran%20is%20one%20of%20the,conquered%20the%20Mesopotamians%20and%20Egyptians.>

The Nature of Islamic Art https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orna/hd_orna.htm

THANK YOU

TO OUR SCHOOL PROGRAMS SPONSORS

Visionary Partner for Community Access:



Corporate Partners:



Foundation Partners:



BEECH FOUNDATION

Parviz Tanavoli: Poets, Locks, Cages is organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and guest curated by Pantea Haghighi, Independent Curator

Lead Exhibition Donor:



Exhibition Catalogue Sponsor:



Cultural Partner:



Additional Sponsors:



The Talaifar
Family

Foundation Partner:



Benefactor:

