

Nasser Bakhshi's Museum-Archive: Excavating the Hidden Layers of Memory

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Abstract

The Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive is recognized as a significant off-center archival and curatorial institution in Iran. Under Nasser Bakhshi's direction, it exhibits historical-archival projects centered on socio-political events. As a pioneer in synthesizing contemporary art and archival research, the institution reconstructs collective memory through interdisciplinary initiatives. Its core approach offers innovative readings of historical traces and remnants through the lens of contemporary art and documentation. Archival projects derive vitality from documents that challenge temporal and existential frameworks of their original subjects, enabling alternative worldviews. Selection criteria prioritize socially sourced documents possessing aesthetic value and potential for transformation into artworks within contemporary art discourse—reflecting global currents that generate “living art” through “living documents.” This continuously expanding collection, encompassing artifacts from

the pre-Islamic era onward, comprises 120,000 paper documents and manuscripts (including over 10,000 handwritten manuscripts), 12,000 lithographically printed books, and tens of thousands of personal objects and material traces of conflicts across West Asia. Systematically classified as an encyclopedic resource, it constitutes the foundational material for historical, documentary, and artistic projects. Seventy percent of the archive pertains to the last two centuries. The museum-archive's distinction lies in its focus on discovering, collecting, and researching non-official collections tied to collective memory—particularly neglected narratives in Iran—and representing them through the integration of archives and contemporary art.

Keywords: Nasser Bakhsbi, Museum-Archive, Collective Memory, Documentation, Contemporary Art, Conceptual, West Asia, Found Aesthetics

Introduction

Archival compilation, particularly within artistic and social domains, constitutes an ideologically and aesthetically charged practice that transcends the realm of memory-based action. Understanding the initial motivations of archivists facilitates comprehension of the underlying orientations and values embedded in their collections. Nasser Bakhsbi¹—an archivist, museum curator, and artist who focuses on documenting underrepresented phenomena in contemporary Iranian society—serves as a prominent case study for examining these motivations. Drawing on Bakhsbi's personal narrative, this article introduces his museum-archive and its role in filling the void of dynamic archives

¹ (B. 1982), based in Tabriz.

in the Middle East. Data collection involved interviews with Bakhshi and his assistants.

According to Bakhshi's account, his decisive initial encounter with art dates back to the 1990s (1370s SH). This exposure occurred in his brothers' carpet-weaving workshops in Tabrīz, through foreign reference books (primarily museum-related) used as design templates for pictorial carpets. A crucial aspect of this experience, as Bakhshi emphasizes, is a fundamental distinction: alongside exposure to classical art, those same sources simultaneously acquainted him with pioneering Western contemporary art movements and figures such as Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, and Anselm Kiefer. Rather than fostering an affinity for classical traditions, this dual familiarity ignited his critical inquiry into contemporary art.

Bakhshi actively pursued this interest through focused studies in contemporary art. This research process served as the precursor to his entry into artistic practice in the early 2000s (1380s SH). During this phase of art-making and documentation, a gradual need emerged within him to gather source materials as inspiration and raw matter for artistic creation. Although initially personal and preliminary in nature, this collecting marked the genesis of a motivation that would later assume a professional and committed form. He identifies the mid-2000s (mid-1380s SH) as the pivotal moment in crystallizing his archival vision, when his resolve to specialize in "artistic creation within contemporary art" solidified. This commitment directed him toward archives possessing two key characteristics: first, personal resonance, and second—perhaps more significantly—the structural neglect within Iran's artistic and research communities at the time. Recognizing this void became a powerful impetus for action. He explicitly acknowledges the rupture between his intellectual framework and Iran's formal art education system. This incongruity prevented his enrollment in domestic art schools or universities. Migration to Belgium for studies in contemporary art and collection management, particularly at specialized institutes of archival science, proved a

critical turning point. The academic training received in Europe transformed his understanding of archiving: he learned that it transcends mere object accumulation, constituting instead a process of uncovering the aesthetic and philosophical values latent within documents. This multidimensional perspective became the cornerstone of his subsequent professional approach.²

The museum-archive, currently Iran's sole private institution of its kind, provides completely free public access to all its sections. This institution, as Iran's first private establishment dedicated to contemporary art archives, operates through a self-sustaining economic model based on the international art sales of its founders. As established artists, their works command high prices through platforms like Artsy and Tehran galleries, with revenues directly funding acquisitions, staff salaries, and collection development. This transparent financial structure ensures operational independence from both governmental and private donors. Despite Iran's challenging political environment, the museum maintains its autonomy through verifiable international art market activities and consistent operation during political tensions. It demonstrates how cultural institutions in developing economies can achieve sustainability through artists' symbolic capital and economic self-reliance, creating a viable alternative space that preserves editorial freedom.

Utilizing non-official historical documents and artifacts (in contrast to state archives in Iran) related to the social, political, and economic history of Tabrīz (Iran) and their interplay with the artist's own conceptual works, it constructs a tangible narrative of history. It deciphers the meaning of events that directly impacted individual lives—impacts lost amidst the clamor of society's written history and left unaddressed. Examples include documents concerning the education of working children (1956-1978), where historical upheavals inflicted severe damage on their lives, yet their voices never reached historians; only attendance registers

² Bakhsbi, Nasser. Personal Interview by Peyman Fathi Rezaei, July 10, 2005.

materially witness these vanished existences. As if their entire life experience amounted to mere presence in a world where the dust of oblivion scattered over their suffering, leaving behind only a blurred image. Likewise, undelivered letters from Iranian migrants—unread and abandoned—bear the anguish of displaced lives absent from history books, yet etched into Nasser Bakhshi's interpretation of the perennial migrant human condition, visibly manifest in his suitcase installations: migration, poverty, war, social crises... all manifestations of human suffering inscribed in biological and historical memory form the subject matter of his museum-archive. His historical perspective employs methods of individual documentation, grounded in preserved non-official historical artifacts and records, embodying an individual-centered anthropological lens.

In this context, Maurice Halbwachs contends that societies require a shared narrative of the past to preserve their identity—a narrative subject to reinterpretation over time to align with new conditions. Collective memory thus functions as a powerful instrument for comprehending the past and shaping the future. Yet this instrument demands conscious, discerning application. we must balance historical remembrance with present-day imperatives (Halbwachs 1992, 211).

Bakhshi posits that artists cannot achieve historical understanding without retelling narratives individual by individual—stories articulated solely through subjective voices.³ His work forges poetic and humanistic connections between artifacts and lived experiences. Employing a curatorial language that illuminates historical transformations, his practice remains infused with profound humanism. Expansive installations coalesce into unified narratives that, through conceptual arrangement, pursue utopian objectives. Visitors traverse these spaces as companions to humanity's journey through time, perceiving themselves as integral components of the whole and achieving empathic identification

³ Bakhshi, Nasser. Personal Interview by Peyman Fathi Rezaei, July 10, 2005.

with the work. This experience intensifies through strategically placed mirrors within the conceptual artwork: when viewers confront their own reflections amidst historical figures, each mirror implicates them among the afflicted. Suffering becomes shared—the anguish of others transforms into one's own.



Figure 1: Sacred Waves, Nasser Bakhsbi, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2023, Tabriz.

The Conceptual and Functional Evolution of Archives in Contemporary Art

In contemporary art, the concept of the archive has undergone a fundamental transformation, transcending traditional definitions based solely on document and object classification to become a creative and constitutive agent in artistic production. Today, archives emerge not merely as raw material or historical backdrop but as artistic objects in their own right, evolving into vital mechanisms for organizing artistic projects. Within this new paradigm, archival resources themselves gain recognition as independent artworks. This conceptual shift has opened novel pathways for developing contemporary art theory and critical

historical rereading—where initial interdisciplinary or supplementary functions have now yielded to profound integration of archival resources into the very fabric of artworks and projects. Expanded information access and transformed attitudes toward documentation have redirected archival functions from pure documentation toward independent, complex artistic projects. As Foster emphasizes, archival artists rescue history from passivity by converting documents into “active spaces of knowledge production” (Foster 2004, 4). This theoretical framework underpins the Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive’s approach to critically rereading neglected documents (such as migrant letters and working children’s records).

Contemporary artists have introduced archives into the aesthetic realm through two key mechanisms: First, semiotic reconfiguration by reconstructing historical objects’ meanings within new contexts, transforming “narrative ambiguity” into an aesthetic element. Second, discursive synthesis integrating documents with artistic media like painting and installation to create material palimpsests. These creative processes, supported by specialized institutions, have shaped a movement termed the “archival turn”—elevating archives from periphery to center of artistic production. This evolution has birthed a “found aesthetics”, wherein an artwork’s value resides not in material authenticity but in its capacity for semantic regeneration and revelation of collective memory’s hidden layers, even through minimal traces expressed with creative novelty. The archival turn positions itself at the intersection of history, memory, and imagination (Rosengarten 2012, 28). The shift from ethnographic to museological and ultimately archival turn constitutes neither revolution nor strict paradigm shift: it is fundamentally a matter of emphasis and degree (Ibid, 11).

These transformations have engendered three fundamental changes: First, epistemological rupture through fracturing linear historical narratives and proposing “parallel histories” based on marginalized documents; Second, democratization of memory by enabling collective participation in redefining historical identity,

particularly in interactive projects; Third, methodological complexity through proliferating hybrid approaches—oral history, digital art, and performance—that open new horizons for knowledge archaeology.

The Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive stands as Iran's pioneering embodiment of this conceptual and practical evolution. The institution's core mission explores archival latent dimensions through contemporary art by systematically collecting, contextualizing, and presenting archival installations. Its methodology reflects the aforementioned complexity through integrated phases: studying collective memory through contemporary art perspectives, tracing its hidden strata, systematic collection and documentation, critical refinement and reinterpretation of archival materials, creating contemporary artworks inspired by these materials, researching document-art interrelations, project curation, conceptual spatialization, and scholarly publication dissemination. Notable projects—examining migrant correspondence, documenting 1950s-60s working children, analyzing political prisoners' photographs, uncovering historical cover design layers, and studying the visual rhetoric of combatants' letters—exemplify this integrated archival approach. The museum's focus on society, culture, politics, and collective memory through contemporary art frames distinguishes it as a trailblazing institution forging systematic, autonomous approaches within Iran's art landscape.

This synthetic methodology not only expands conceptual art boundaries but transforms history into a “living ideation workshop,” enabling “fluid knowledge production”—knowledge perpetually moving through past-present-future dialectics. This emancipates archives from their passive role as memory-keepers, transforming them into dynamic agents of contemporary meaning-making and aesthetic regeneration.

Building upon its foundational work with found aesthetics, the Tabriz Museum-Archive consciously navigates the ethical

complexities of representing human suffering through what may be termed a “critical aesthetics of care.” This approach treats the transformation of difficult histories into art not as normalization of pain, but as a process of “authentic expression” that must balance three essential demands: narrative honesty, preservation of human dignity, and meaningful expressive impact.

In practical terms, the institution employs specific methodological safeguards. The wrapping of migrants' letters in layered paper simultaneously creates a physical boundary protecting identities and serves as a metaphor for historical ambiguity. Similarly, the focus on documents exceeding fifty years for child laborers and eighty years for prisoners establishes crucial historical distance while protecting privacy, thereby enabling more profound critical engagement.

Aesthetically, the museum rejects “decorative aesthetics” in favor of an “existential aesthetics” committed to representing the depth of suffering and injustice with fidelity. Its works strive to present difficult truths not as passive spectacle, but as realities requiring direct and honest confrontation—developing what might be called an “aesthetics of shadows.” While constantly aware of the risk of “aesthetic exploitation of suffering,” the museum's practical safeguards and ethical commitment endeavors to transform this inherent tension into a catalyst for sustained critical reflection, rather than masking them.

Structure and Operations of the Nasser Bakhshi Archive

The Nasser Bakhshi archival collection, while encompassing historical periods from pre-Islamic eras to the present, anchors its primary focus on contemporary epochs (the last 200 years), which constitute 70% of total holdings with emphasis on socio-political events in West Asia. Continuous quantitative expansion operates through a specialized network of 200 international dealers, enabling weekly acquisition of approximately 1,000 new items. This dynamic workflow is sustained by a twenty-member team

executing an organized cycle of classification, conservation, shelving, and documentation.

Material preservation and processing adhere to rigorous archival lifecycle protocols and conservation requirements. The collection is organized within dedicated functional zones including acquisition (purchasing) offices, preliminary assessment (initial inspection and classification) units, research (content analysis) sections, conservation laboratories (physical stabilization), and long-term storage preparation areas. Complementary specialized repositories comprise climate-controlled core repositories for paper-based materials; secure vaults for physically vulnerable items; low-light environmentally controlled chambers for historical photographs and color documents; custom-built storage for three-dimensional objects categorized by medium, dimensions, and conservation needs; alongside secure digital repository systems featuring metadata management and multi-layer backup. Materials undergoing assessment or conservation are subject to restricted access protocols to ensure preservation integrity.

The collection's ultimate function transcends mere preservation, focusing on transforming materials into knowledge. Decisions regarding material dissemination—whether through artistic projects or specialized scholarly publications via *Archive Book*⁴—are made only after completing thorough assessment and research processes. This targeted approach converts raw archival materials into reliable resources for academic and artistic communities. Collection management employs a hierarchical, process-driven structure based on international professional standards to achieve three key objectives: safeguarding vulnerable materials, ensuring specialized processing throughout the archival lifecycle, and providing systematic access for creative reinterpretation and academic research.

⁴ Specialized and private publications affiliated with the Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive in Tabriz.

The collection comprises diverse material types organized into over seven hundred distinct thematic categories. Quantitative and qualitative details are as follows:

- Paper documents: Forming the core with over 120,000 items, these encompass legal/administrative records (personal/corporate documents), personal papers, correspondence, proclamations, human education process records spanning the past century (from schools, education departments, cultural and governmental institutions), and other printed/handwritten materials related to socio-political developments.
- Lithographic books: A significant collection exceeding 5,000 volumes.
- Manuscripts: Tens of thousands of items stored separately from the aforementioned paper documents.
- Three-dimensional objects and material artifacts: This category, also numbering tens of thousands, includes:
 - personal belongings of individuals connected to studied events/groups, and three hundred African masks
 - Material remnants of wars—particularly from West Asian conflicts (Iran-Iraq War, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia)
 - Symbolic and everyday objects linked to uprisings, revolutions, and social movements
 - Digital records: Including digitized materials and born-digital content.

Although a substantial part of this archive relates to Iran, its geographical scope is consciously transnational, centered on West Asia. This perspective is framed by a “transnational collective memory” that surpasses modern political borders, grounded not in geopolitics but in “shared historical and cultural commonalities.” Examples include lithographs from Constantinople and India preserving Persian texts, and letters from Syrian and Iraqi migrants expressing a shared regional experience of displacement. Including records of contemporary conflicts, such as the Syrian war, does not diminish the focus on Iran, but rather highlights the “mutual

influence” among societies of the region—allowing Iranian society to see its own reflection in neighbouring crises and better understand its place in a wider context.

The collection methodology employs “decentralized knowledge networks,” drawing on academic collaborations, regional diasporas, and local antique markets. Strategically, the archive creates a “parallel discourse” for interpreting regional history, breaking the narrative monopoly of cultural power centers and enabling an “intersubjective understanding” of regional developments beyond nationalist historiography. Ultimately, this transnational outlook constructs a “more complex portrait of Iranian collective memory,” where Iranian identity is reread as part of an interconnected West Asian civilizational sphere.

The archive documents contemporary regional phenomena—including uprisings, religious and sexual minorities, and marginalized forms of resistance—from political, social, cultural, and aesthetic viewpoints, using a critical, contemporary approach. As such, it differs fundamentally from traditional Iranian archives (e.g., the National Library) and challenges Orientalist paradigms about archives in the East.

Museum-Archive Approach

The Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive formalized its specialized archival documentation approach in the second half of the 2000s (17-20 years ago), influenced by European contemporary art pedagogy. This methodology centers on consciously foregrounding subjects and documents omitted or deliberately excluded from official narratives. Exemplary cases include letters from Iranian migrants (as testaments to lived migratory experiences and transnational connections) and records of marginalized social groups such as working children, juvenile offenders, and educational experiences of gender and religious minorities. The collection's purpose transcends preservation, aiming to transform documents into contemporary artistic projects

and research resources for active scholarly and artistic engagement—reflecting its commitment to recording silenced narratives.

The archive's philosophical foundation rests on a critical understanding of archival nature. Historical archives may be categorized broadly into two types: first, voluntary archives (e.g., state documents) created to institutionalize official narratives; and second, random or neglected archives—either inadvertently preserved or devalued by power structures. The collection prioritizes the latter category. Its core significance lies in documenting erased narratives, silenced voices, and phenomena absent from institutional memory, particularly in addressing Iran's historical memory voids. This perspective aligns with Maurice Halbwachs' sociological theories of collective memory. Halbwachs argues that “there exists no memory outside the frameworks used by living society members to recall and record recollections” (Halbwachs 1992, 63). He maintains that the past is a social construct shaped primarily by present-day concerns (Coser 2022, 86), and “every individual memory is a viewpoint on collective memory” (Halbwachs 1992, 94). By activating these neglected documents, the Bakhshi collection seeks to critically reconstruct collective memory through the very group frameworks to which these memories belong.

The collection's strategic mandate prioritizes documentation projects significant through contemporary art and archival theory lenses. This selection transcends passive accumulation, relying on proactive aesthetic engagement. Materials undergo assessment not merely for historical value but for latent aesthetic potential—their capacity for artistic transformation.⁵ The founder's expertise at the intersection of contemporary art and archival science enables creating artworks from documentary sources. Central to this is the concept of “living documents”: materials gathered directly from

⁵ According to personal interview with Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive Curatorial Group, headed by Sānā'i Sarvarī, July 10, 2005.

society during unfolding events, possessing immediate potential for conversion into artworks or documentary projects. The collection's temporal strategy reflects this dynamism through balanced focus on past and present: half its resources target active documentation of current events (minimizing occurrence-recording gaps), while the other half facilitates critical re-examination of historical occurrences. This methodology distinguishes it from retrospective museums, transforming it into a responsive institution engaged with contemporary social transformations. As Foster notes, it enables “a dialectical conversation between past and present” (Foster 2004, 15). The aspirational vision entails evolving into an inclusive, polyphonic museum—not monopolized by any single discourse, ideology, or intellectual faction, but encompassing all societal contradictions and experiences. The collection's pride resides in gathering, discovering, researching, and transforming neglected materials into classified artistic projects. By making these accessible to researchers and the public through initiatives like specialized *Archive Book* publications, it fulfills its role in enriching the collective memory of Iran and West Asia. This stance constitutes an essential response to Iran's deficit in contemporary archival approaches and practitioners' insufficient grasp of archives' role in contemporary art.

Categorization and Archival Arrangement

Hall One: Curiosity – Embodiments of Good and Evil (Khayr va Sharr) in Visual and Literary Heritage

The inaugural hall, titled *Curiosity*, examines the phenomenology Khayr va Sharr concept through four primary mediums: illustration, poetry, correspondence, and design. It traces the formation of these ethical constructs in Nasser Bakhshi's works through engagement with historical source materials.



Figure 2 Lithographic Book, Hall 1, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2022, Tabriz.

Opposite the entrance, a collection of lithographic books—primarily from Tabriz printing houses—is presented as foundational research

resources for Iranian print history. Beyond their collectible value, these works hold scholarly significance due to unique characteristics in publishing history, print technology, illustration morphology, and socio-cultural discourse analysis of their respective periods. Their selection for this hall directly responds to the illustrators' unvarnished frankness in visually representing good and evil (*Khayr va Sharr*). Displaying specimens without conventional labels or cataloging confronts viewers directly with symbolic scenes of moral dualism. These raw representations—shaped by historical exigencies, visual traditions, and contemporary social norms—not only reflect pedagogical systems and cultural inspirations of their era but reveal sharp, often impassable divides between moral binaries in religious, literary, historical, and secular texts. The enduring potency of these visualizations, still unsettling after nearly two centuries, enables excavation of hidden strata of ethical perception within Iranian culture.



Figure 3: Lithographic Book, Hall 1, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2022, Tabriz.



Figure 4: Religious Poetry, Hall 1, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2021, Tabriz.

In deliberate counterpoint to this section, the opposite plane presents handwritten letters, notes, and personal notebooks of religious poets from the past three centuries. This treasury comprises works by over three hundred poets—renowned, lesser-known, and anonymous—primarily preserved as unique manuscripts. The display methodology intentionally omits identifiers: notebooks appear without owners' or poets' names, compelling viewers to confront the visual power of language before historical contextualization. These texts—spanning theology, physics, and astronomy—manifest concepts of good and

evil (*Khayr va Sharr*) through lyrical and consummately crafted literary-mystical expressions. Reading selected lines transports audiences into an oral-written tradition perpetuated through generations in Iranian religious literature (particularly *Ta'zīyah* poetry), endowing Iran's cultural geography with unparalleled moral morphology.

The juxtaposition of these two planes (image-centric lithography and poetic manuscripts) reveals the dialectic of moral representation across complementary media—image and word. By collecting, preserving, and exhibiting these works within the “embodiment of Good and Evil” (*Khayr va Sharr*) project, the museum-archive not only enriches Iran's cultural memory but transcends their historical significance by emphasizing inherent aesthetic values of these texts and images, thereby inspiring contemporary artists and researchers. This hall, bearing witness to decades of archival documentation and interpretation, enables critical engagement with ethical history through unmediated encounters with raw cultural material.

In the adjacent plane, a collection of migrant letters is displayed in frames. This treasury comprises over 3,000 letters, presenting correspondences from Iranian migrants over the past fifty years. Sent from across the globe to families in Iran, these documents reflect lived experiences of longing, tribulations, aspirations, and emotional dualities born of territorial rupture. Their exhibition—featuring deliberate anonymization through wrapping in historical paper sleeves (sourced from half-century-old albums)—confronts viewers with contemporary representations of good-evil (*Khayr va Sharr*) dialectics within migrant lifeworlds. This symbolic encasement simultaneously safeguards privacy and serves as a metaphor for ambiguities in oral history interpretation. As part of the museum's research-publication projects, these documents will undergo semantic analysis transcending individual identities in a forthcoming scholarly monograph. Migrant letters symbolize the bewilderment of humans seeking their authentic essence—perhaps conversely severed from it—yet fundamentally narrate the

complex untold stories of those compelled to migrate. Collected from families, friends, and migrants themselves over five decades, these correspondences confront us with a truth embedded in this land: countless families have grappled with migration's existential



meaning, a reality never divorced from this geography's lived experience. (Figures 5 and 6)

In conceptual counterpoint, Nasser Bakhshi's designs based on historical dried-flower albums are presented. These works create polychronic bridges of collective memory by merging fossilized botanical elements with surrealist imagery of contemporary events. The layered compositional technique simultaneously evokes nostalgia, historical haunting, and

sedimentation of memories in the collective psyche. This signature conceptual contemporary art approach is complemented by adjacent displays of sketches, three-dimensional maquettes, and study negatives that reveal the artist's ideation process.



The “Time Boxes” project forms another axis of this hall. Central vitrines contain receptacles functioning as memory capsules: vintage photo albums, sacred texts (Qur’āns, prayer books) and traditional protective scrolls, alongside contemporary art boxes housing symbolic artifacts.

This deliberate juxtaposition between historical containers—which safeguarded secrets and treasured possessions in Iranian culture—and their contemporary reinterpretation as installations, accentuates objects’ roles as vessels of cultural memory. The narrative culminates in displaying a WWII food supply tent—a museal artifact documenting humanitarian aid routes from Berlin to Tabrīz during famine. This object, itself a memory of human solidarity in crisis, serves as a mediator between history and Bakhshi’s artistic inventions. As Enwezor notes the variety and range of archival methods and artistic forms, the mediatory structures that underpin the artists’ mnemonic strategies in their use of the archive, and the conceptual, curatorial, and temporal principles that each undertakes, point to the resilience of the archive as both form and medium in contemporary art. In the works, we are confronted with relationships between archive and memory, archive and public information, archive and trauma, archive and ethnography, archive and identity, archive and time (Enwezor 2008, 22).

The arrangement of these three elements (letters, botanical designs, time boxes) constitutes a complex memory-making apparatus through which the museum-archive conducts deep exploration into collective memory’s morphology. This space functions not merely as object display but as a living workshop of contemporary thought where: raw documents (letters) become raw material for artistic reinterpretation; ideation processes (sketches) are laid bare; and historical artifacts (famine tent) transform into cross-cultural dialogue mediators. Collectively, they summon viewers to reconsider memory’s production, preservation, and transmission mechanisms in the face of civilizational ruptures.

Nasser Bakhshi's installations similarly evoke this curiosity in viewers—an interactive sense of discovery that physically excavates memory layers like an unfolding narrative, reaching toward transcendent meaning. While his works carry nostalgic resonance, they simultaneously embody contemporary, even prophetic qualities that narrate futures. They feature identity constructs that ultimately advance the concept of unlocking collective memory: that repository of human lived narratives generating nostalgic consciousness. Bakhshi's works reveal explorations of humanity's tangible and historical worlds through their most delicate strata and angles. Within them, art becomes contemplative space where audiences encounter vast semantic layers across time and place—layers resisting coherent apprehension of the creator's intentionality. Historical and political concepts manifest through hybrid paintings and three-dimensional objects, materializing artworks into testimonies emerging from survivors' psyches and daily lives. These creations evoke the late 19th and early 20th centuries—an era of pre-digital materiality when objects were crafted by skilled hands for longevity, when mechanical interiors could be opened and their essences discovered.

From this perspective, collective memory constitutes the past reconstructed through present-day lenses. To endure, it requires continuous nourishment from communal sources and support from social/ethical frameworks. Just as humans depend on others, memory too needs communal sustenance. Nevertheless, those responsible for representing the past recognize history as perpetually fluid—simultaneously changing and continuous. Halbwachs, perhaps overemphasizing change, neglected continuity. Yet closer examination reveals that while present generations rewrite history, they “do not write upon a blank slate” (Halbwachs 1992, 34).

Hall Two: Dust and Whispers- Archaeology of the Creative Mindset

Hall Two of the Museum-Archive, titled *Dust and Whispers*, examines the internal processes of creativity through a re-reading of the archives of three influential agents of contemporary Iranian culture. This installation, which also places the works of Nasser Bakhshi in dialogue with these documents, focuses on the manifestations of the stream of consciousness in artistic productions and even seemingly non-artistic actions. This juxtaposition proves the historical continuity of the “self-reflective process” in various forms (from traditional to contemporary, from religious to secular).

The first axis is dedicated to Mīrzā ‘Alī Qulī Khū’ī⁶ (early 13th century AH / mid-19th century CE), the pioneer of lithographic illustration in Tabrīz. Analysis of his works reveals a remarkable fusion between cultural-historical commissions (literary, historical books) and the melancholic expression of the artist's inner world. This approach, evident in the intricate motifs and psychoanalytic states within his works, indicates creative subjectification: Khū’ī was not merely an executor of commissions, but an active subject who transformed each project into an opportunity to explore the

⁶ Mīrzā ‘Alī Qulī Khū’ī spent his youth in Tabrīz, where lithographic printing was possible before the major printing houses relocated to Tehran. Based on evidence in his style, it can be surmised that he received formal training. The Niẓāmī’s *Khamsab*, dated 1264 AH (1847/48 CE), shows that he was the unrivaled master of lithographic illustration of his time. He possessed a distinctive style in precise illustration, particularly in the details of human expressions, both facial and gestural. Beautiful humans are always depicted in a three-quarter profile, whereas ugly individuals and old women are portrayed in half-profile. While the faces of figures are usually depicted in a similar state, their emotions are conveyed through bodily movements (Marzloff 2001, 31).

depths of his own being. This strategy represents a historical precursor to the contemporary concept of “art as self-inquiry.”



Figure 7-8 : Working Children, Hall Two, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2021, Tabriz.

In dialectical counterpoint to this section, documents by Firīdūn Āv⁷ (contemporary avant-garde painter, gallerist, and collector) are presented. His scribbled-over book pages speak of the turbulent act of rethinking: Āv, by defacing scholars' accolades written in the margins of the pages, enacts a form of epistemological disobedience. This act, which can be termed “constructive destruction,” simultaneously expresses the rejection of external narratives about the self and an effort to preserve authenticity in

⁷ (B. 1945), Tehran.

the face of the traps of fame. These documents affirm Āv's lifeworld as a perpetually reconfiguring collage.

The third facet of this triad is Muḥammad Bāqir Khū'ī Kalkattih'chī⁸ (early 14th century SH/ early 20th century CE), a cultural-economic agent. His nocturnal tables, which link daily activities (meetings, transactions, philanthropic decisions) with divinatory consultation (Istikhāriḥ) and ethical evaluation, function as cognitive maps. These papers, categorized as “non-professional self-reflexive processes,” demonstrate that the stream of consciousness is not exclusive to artists; rather, it can crystallize within the quotidian rhythms of critical reflection by social actors. The organic lines and drawn symbols in the margins of these tables are material evidence of an inner mental architecture that, even without the intention of creating a “work,” generates its own specific aesthetics.

The central vitrine of the hall, by assembling diverse examples of these mental dynamics, completes the exhibition's theoretical framework and forms a conceptual synthesis within the central display case. This synthesis encompasses the melancholic designs of Mīrzā 'Alī Qulī Khū'ī, the scribbled-over pages of Firīdūn Āv, the divinatory-tables of Muḥammad Bāqir Khū'ī, a copy of the mystical book *Nuḏḥat al Arvāḥ* by Shahrūzī (focusing on the biographies and opinions of 127 sages after the advent of Islam), and a Qajar-era Qur'ān featuring improvisational marginal

⁸ The Kalkattih'chī family was one of the prominent families in a specific period of Tabrīz, playing a distinctive role in the city's social and economic dimensions. This family is among the noble and reputable families of Tabrīz, known for their philanthropic activities and historical buildings associated with them. The large Kalkattih'chī clan were renowned merchants in the tea trade, who frequently travelled to the Calcutta region of India due to lands they owned there. Besides the tea trade, other activities of this family included spinning, weaving, and carpet weaving. This prominent clan rendered significant services in the city of Tabrīz, constructing numerous buildings and mosques. The head of the Kalkattih'chī family was a virtuous and philanthropic individual who, in addition to contributing to the construction of mosques and schools, also bore substantial expenses for the installation of water pipelines to the city of Tabrīz.

annotations – which, despite not conforming to classical aesthetic standards, bear witness to faithful sincerity and profound sense-perception.

Dust and Whispers proposes three fundamental theses by transcending the conventional boundaries of art historiography. First, the process-oriented essence: creativity resides not in the final product, but in the inner dynamics preceding creation. Second, the democratization of expression: the stream of consciousness is not exclusive to professional artists; rather, it manifests in the actions of any human being engaged in critical reflection upon their lifeworld. And third, the archive as collective psychoanalysis: historical documents, by revealing the hidden layers of their creators' subjectivity, enable the archaeology of a society's psyche.

This hall demonstrates that the inner whispers of individuals (the seemingly ephemeral dust of history), through their material registration in the archive, become part of humanity's eternal dialogue concerning the nature of the self.

Hall Three: The Formative Process – Artistic Development Chambers

Hall Three of the Museum-Archive, titled *The Formative Process*, is dedicated to examining the ideation and development processes of Nasser Bakhshi's works through the display of study maquettes, inspirational objects, and preliminary sketches. This space, by assembling small-scale samples that formed the basis for the artist's larger structures, reveals the mechanism of transforming sensory perceptions into artistic forms. The arrangement of these works, in conceptual continuity with the previous two halls (*Curiosity*, and *Dust and Whispers*), interrogates the role of objects as mediators of collective memory in the formation of the artist's visual language.

The conceptual core of the hall rests on the metaphor of the camera obscura as a model for creative perception. This historical

analogy – whose precedent dates back to the mechanical use of dark chambers by pre-modern artists for studying nature, coinciding with the invention of photography – is here materially embodied through the display of a device known as a stereoscope⁹, made in England (circa 1860). Positioned at the center of the hall, this device, utilizing a binocular mechanism and candle-based illumination, transformed flat images into a three-dimensional, dreamlike experience. It serves as a symbol of: viewpoint reduction (observing reality through a limited aperture); constructionism of truth (converting incomplete data into a coherent image); and media disambiguation (merging scientific function with entertainment). (Figures 9-10)



Figure 9-10: Stereoscope, Hall Three, circa 1860, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2021, Tabriz.

⁹ A device that merges the images seen separately by the left and right eyes to display a (virtual) three-dimensional image. The stereoscope features two ocular lenses. Each ocular lens magnifies the image and makes it appear slightly farther away than usual; for someone with normal depth perception, the edges of the photo converge, creating the illusion of a stereo window.

This visual metaphor provides the key for interpreting the peripheral vitrines, which contain a polychronic (multi-temporal) array of symbolic objects: structural maquettes as mediators of transition from idea to artwork; surgical tools as semiotics of human suffering; stopped clocks as metaphors for temporal ruptures; vessels containing liquids symbolizing distillations of lived experience; and painterly preliminary sketches capturing the initial sparks of perception.

All these elements are organized not according to historical or thematic sequence, but as sensory assemblages. This deliberate choice invites the audience to a pre-cognitive experience that precedes historical analysis or museological classification. Moving through this space immerses the visitor in a field of reciprocal forces that transform collective memory into raw material for artistic creation: on one hand, temporal compression (the coexistence of artifacts from discontinuous periods); on the other, sensory expansion (the multiplicity of tactile, visual, and metaphorical signs).

The culmination of this journey is an encounter with the artist's existential mirror—a cognitive construct formed through his engagement with these seemingly disparate objects. Hall Three: *The Formation Process*, by revealing this hidden dynamic, demonstrates that collective memory in Bakhsbi's creative apparatus is not a static repository but a dynamic workshop where history, mediated through the artist's personal perception, is translated into contemporary aesthetic statements. This stands in contrast to the standard view of the archives, oftentimes evokes a dim, musty place full of drawers, filing cabinets, and shelves laden with old documents, an inert repository of historical artifacts against the

archive as an active, regulatory discursive system (Enwezor 2008, 11).



The works in this hall—comprising paintings and boxes, maquettes and vitrines, found objects and elements—reconstruct a shattered dream of what the artist has shaped from his surroundings. This process, materialized in confronting the shattered dream surrounding the artist, is observed through the lens of a witness who has monitored truths through an aperture and rendered them visible. Here, elements and images serve as a chamber for bearing witness to the process of experience and embodiment in the face of temporally unfolding events—events that, in the artist’s belief, often cannot be altered. This hall, where works are intentionally compressed within vitrines, serves as an allegory for the mental world and collective memory in the process of becoming complex and intricate matters, acting as a prelude to the works in Hall Four.

Hall Four: Hidden Boundaries – Archaeology of Self-Redefinition

Hall Four of the Museum-Archive, titled *Hidden Boundaries* (resulting from the collaboration between Nasser Bakhshi and

Roghayeh Najdi¹⁰, explores processes of individual and collective identity redefinition through encounters with historical objects and documents. This project, nourished by the museum's permanent collection, employs an interdisciplinary approach (historical-artistic-anthropological) to reveal the mechanisms of rethinking humanity's relationship with its surroundings.

The Hidden Boundaries project is a redefinition of semantic identity, archival-historical sources, and the relationships of its redefinition in contemporary art. This project traces documents, objects, and interactions, examining how works are created through this approach, ultimately dissolving categorization and curating them in light of contemporary political and social events. By considering archival discourse and contemporary art, the Museum-Archive aims to open a window for attention to such projects and re-readings tied to socio-political approaches—an urgent need in this historical moment for the region. Hundreds of archival and artistic works from the Museum-Archive's permanent collection are displayed in this project.

The opening section is dedicated to reinterpreting ritual textiles from diverse societies. Unlike classical museological approaches focused solely on ethnographic or surface aesthetic aspects, this exhibition emphasizes the synaesthesia of handmade weaves, probing the tactile memory embedded



Figure 13-14: Textiles, Hall Four, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2024, Tabriz.

¹⁰ (B. 1982) Contemporary Iranian artist, based in Tabriz.



within fabrics. A notable example is a ceremonial cloak (*ʿAbā*) sewn two hundred years ago, featuring floral handwoven lace, green velvet, and delicate embroidery—offering a tangible embodiment of tactile ontology in pre-industrial society. This work raises a fundamental question: How has the decline of haptic consciousness in contemporary industrial production created an epistemological rupture in our perception of the world? Two adjacent panels represent the *Sipāh i Dānish* project¹¹ (the rural education system in Iran during the 1960s-1970s / 1340s-1350s SH) as a metaphor for unexplored social strata. The display of photographs and documents of these children—many of whom later became prominent scientific-cultural figures—serves as a metaphor for spotlighting social depths. This educational action

¹¹ *Sipāh i Dānish* was an educational institution established during the Pahlavī II era as part of the implementation of the Sixth Principle of the White Revolution. Its primary goal was combating illiteracy and improving education in rural and deprived areas of the country. Founded in 1962 (1341 SH), it commenced operations in 1963 (1342 SH).

functioned not merely as knowledge transfer, but as a process of revealing hidden talents within marginalized geographies.



Figure 15-16 : Qajar Qur'an cover, Hall Four, Source: Nasser Bakhsbi Museum-Archive, 2024, Tabriz.



In a significant counterpoint, the lower panel is dedicated to displaying the separated layers of a Qajar-era book binding. This artifact, formed by pasting waste papers (voided checks, *Dīvān* administrative documents, imported goods labels), functions as a material palimpsest: each layer proclaims its own semiotic world, and the accidental fusion of elements has created a “found aesthetics.” Its multilayered structure serves as a metaphor for the complexities of social history. This approach concretizes the

articulation of contemporary art with the concept of organized chance within material traditions. (Figures 15 & 16)

The opposite panel presents three eloquent representations of historical reinterpretation or political redefinitions (the destruction and reconstruction of meaning). These three types include: 1) A painting of the ruins of Kabul University (destroyed by the Taliban in 2001), serving as a metaphor for the eternal cycle of “construction-destruction-reconstruction” in Middle Eastern political history; 2) A photo album of the 1953 coup (28 Mordād 1332 SH) with retrospective notes by a soldier who, two decades later, comprehended the event's true meaning; and 3) A vitrine containing soils from Tabrīz and remnants of the Iran-Iraq War, combining soils from battlefields, children's drawings by Ḥalabchah victims, and found objects as “archaeology of war.” This triptych outlines the process of historical perspective transformation from lived experience to critical reflection.

The central installation of the hall, combining combative hands, toy dolls, and shattered mirrors, represents the ontology of identity across three levels: the level of conflict (war with external constructs), the level of play (recreation of signs), and the level of reflection (fragmented encounter with the self). This composition recognizes the process of redefinition not as a conscious choice, but as an unintended dialectical synthesis between opposing internal-external forces.

Hall Four: *Hidden Boundaries*, transcending conventional museology, coherently proposes these fundamental theses: that identity is a fluid construct formed at the intersection of objects' sensory memory and historical reinterpretations; that meaning perpetually exists in a state of becoming, reproduced by each generation through rereading the palimpsest of prior signs; and that the boundaries of self/other are not inherent attributes, but products of human situatedness within political-cultural cycles. By

transforming the archive into a meaning-production machine, this hall enables endless readings of the collective self.

Within Iran's art scene, the Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive stands as a critical model of an alternative space, generating dynamism for artistic currents operating outside official power centers. In a context of complex social and political pressures, it provides a vital alternative to state-sanctioned archives by consciously documenting neglected narratives—such as those of migrants, working children, and minorities. Moving beyond passive collection, it redefines documents as living artistic materials, transforming them into artistic and research projects to create a sustainable mechanism for the survival of alternative discourse. This pioneering model of resistant cultural institution-building exists at the intersection of politics, society, and contemporary art aesthetics.

This initiative is part of a broader decentralization of Iran's cultural landscape, marked by the emergence of independent hubs in cities like Tabrīz. This shift is driven by a new generation of cultural activists using digital media and the formation of direct international networks that bypass Tehran's traditional intermediary role. The Tabrīz Museum-Archive exemplifies this as an avant-garde model, creating a self-reliant core through independent curatorial production and collecting works outside mainstream frameworks. This evolution can be understood through the theory of “peripheral nucleuses,” where cities like Tabrīz redefine their role not in opposition to, but alongside the center, transforming the dynamic from a classical center-periphery relationship to one of horizontal collaboration among multiple hubs. Thus, cultural decentralization in Iran signifies the emergence of “self-governing cultural satellites,” heralding a structural transformation toward a multipolar cultural landscape.

Conclusion

Nasser Bakhshi's motivation for assembling the archive began with an accidental encounter with contemporary art during his adolescence in Tabrīz, reinforced by his critical questioning of official classical currents. His initial need for sources of inspiration to create artworks stimulated the collection of documents in his youth, but the formation of his specialized and committed archival vision resulted from three key factors: the imperative to fill archival voids in Iran, a rupture from the country's official art education system, and academic training in Europe in both theoretical and practical archiving. His professional approach, initiated two decades ago, is grounded in the critical documentation of marginalized and neglected subjects with a focus on aesthetic-philosophical values. These archives transcend object collections, designed as artistic-research projects for re-reading social history from alternative perspectives. Bakhshi's case study highlights the role of lived experience, specialized training, and commitment to marginalized narratives in creating a unique approach to archiving in Iran.

The Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive engages in international creation/presentation and collects/archives non-official documents and conceptual art-related works, significantly mitigating the crisis of capital-centric (Tehran) concentration in this field within its capacity, thereby paving the way for other artists. The collection, characterized by an extensive temporal scope (with decisive emphasis on recent centuries), immense and growing volume, and remarkable typological diversity (including voluminous paper documents, valuable lithographic and manuscript books, and tens of thousands of material objects), is systematically organized into multiple thematic collections. Its nature is transnational and regional (West Asia), committed to critically recording and interpreting contemporary socio-political developments—particularly voices and experiences of lesser-seen or marginalized groups—through diverse archival materials. By transforming “documents” into “sites of dialogue” where Western

researchers can engage with the region's unofficial narratives, this archive redefines the role of libraries in Middle Eastern studies.

The Nasser Bakhshi Museum-Archive fundamentally redefines the relationship between archive and contemporary art, transforming historical documents from passive states into dynamic artistic statements. This shift hinges on three innovations: First, sensory revitalization of materials through novel display strategies that subvert the passive gaze of traditional museology. Notable examples include displaying migrants' letters in historical envelopes—preserving privacy while materializing historical narrative ambiguity—or embedding photographs within everyday objects. Second, the 50/50 temporal strategy creates a living dialogue between past and present by dialectically linking 200-year-old documents with contemporary records (phenomena like working children, migrants, protests), turning the archive into a machine for generating future possibilities. Third, decentralizing cultural geography by situating the institution in Tabrīz, effecting two radical transformations: breaking Tehran's monopoly as a cultural center and converting the region into a platform for simultaneous recording of current events (living archive). This model, adhering to global standards (including specialized publication like *Archive Book*), proves archives can be tools for reclaiming the epistemic agency of marginalized groups. By making Tabrīz a “peripheral nucleus” for reconstructing West Asia's fractured histories, the museum embodies Foster's “archival impulse” (Foster 2004, 3-22), where documents are not frozen objects but dynamic instruments of rethinking. Ultimately, the Bakhshi Museum-Archive demonstrates that archival praxis in contemporary art is a living workshop—beyond object preservation—for re-memoring shattered memories and critically rethinking West Asia's history; a space where frozen documents metamorphose into living matter for constructing possible futures.

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