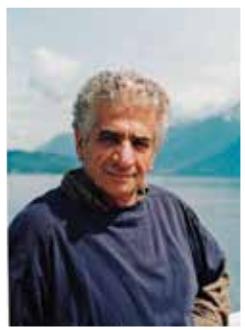


# Parviz Tanavoli

BY KRIS WILTON

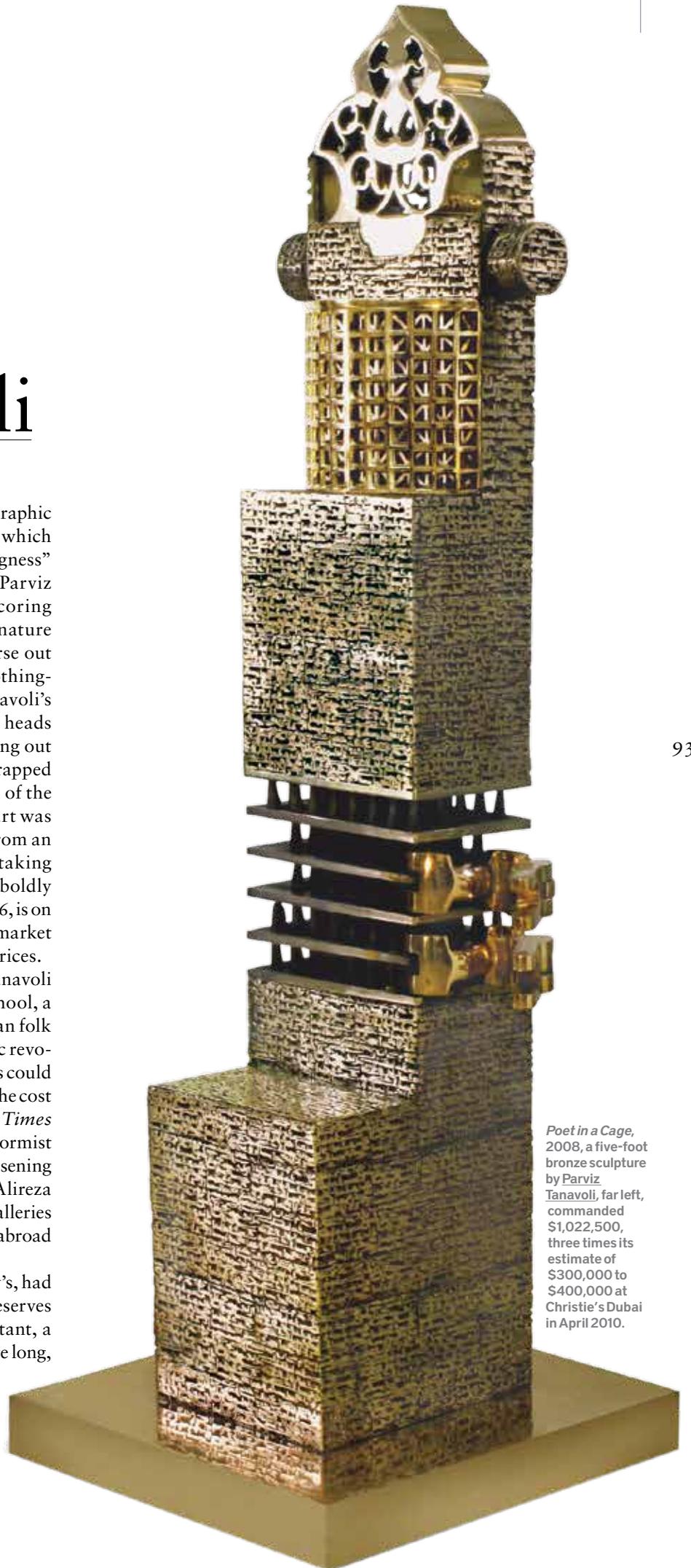


THE SIMPLE SWEEPING calligraphic strokes of the word *heech*, which means “nothing” or “nothingness” in Farsi, take center stage in Parviz Tanavoli’s oeuvre, underscoring Sufi notions of the mystical nature of God: He created a universe out of nothing, and therefore nothingness is everywhere. Yet Tanavoli’s *heeches*, with their pointy heads unfurling like sprouts, poking out

from cages, entwined with other *heeches*, or simply wrapped about a chair might be better read as representations of the Tehran-born sculptor himself. Coming of age when art was largely the purview of the state, Tanavoli, emerged from an intellectual void to create radically different works, taking sacred script out of the confines of the madrasa and boldly casting it in the round for all to see. Today the sculptor, 76, is on the forefront of an Iranian resurgence on the global art market where his work has commanded once-unfathomable prices.

Honing his craft in the late 1950s and early ’60s, Tanavoli helped found the neo-traditionalist Saqqakhaneh School, a spiritual Pop art movement that drew largely on Iranian folk traditions that flourished until it fell prey to the Islamic revolution of 1979. “For years [afterward], Iranian painters could not sell their paintings for a price that could even cover the cost of their canvas and paint,” Tanavoli told the *New York Times* in 2008. Then, he says, things began to change when reformist president Mohammad Khatami took power in 1997, loosening restrictions and appointing art historian and architect Alireza Sami Azar to direct the state-run Visual Arts Center. Galleries began to multiply and Azar avidly promoted local work abroad until he left the museum for Christie’s in 2005.

At that time, the auction house and its rival, Sotheby’s, had begun moving into the oil-rich region, tapping great reserves of under-recognized artists and, perhaps more important, a new generation of wealthy collectors and patrons. Before long, Iranian art was going for five, six, or even seven figures, with Tanavoli leading the way. In April 2008 a record was set when his elaborate six-foot bronze *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)*, 1975, soared past an estimate of \$400,000 to \$600,000 at Christie’s Dubai to sell for \$2,841,000, the highest price ever paid for a modern Iranian work.



*Poet in a Cage*, 2008, a five-foot bronze sculpture by Parviz Tanavoli, far left, commanded \$1,022,500, three times its estimate of \$300,000 to \$400,000 at Christie’s Dubai in April 2010.



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In April 2008 Tanavoli's six-foot bronze *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)*, 1975, above, sold at Christie's Dubai for \$2,841,000. It was the highest price ever paid for a modern Iranian work, a record that still stands. A 15-inch *Heech in a Cage*, 2006, right, issued in an edition of six, is available from Waterhouse & Dodd for \$52,000.

Until then, Tanavoli, who emigrated to Vancouver in 1989, had enjoyed strong sales in the West—but nothing like that sale in Dubai. “It’s a very clear demarcation,” says Ted Lederer, owner of Elliott Louis Gallery, in Vancouver, which began representing Tanavoli a decade ago, after the artist simply walked in one day and introduced himself. A few years before shattering records, *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)* had been on offer at the gallery for \$160,000 to \$180,000. It finally sold for “around a quarter million,” Lederer recalls, only to go for 10 times its price within a year. “Things really exploded,” he says.

Ray Waterhouse of Waterhouse & Dodd, who has been selling Tanavoli works in his London and New York galleries since 2008, says the sculptor owes his particular commercial success

to both his revered position in Iranian art history and his ample Western exposure. Tanavoli has attracted Middle Eastern admirers such as Abu Dhabi’s crown princess Sheikha Salama, who picked up *The Wall and the Tree* (2007), a 31-inch unique bronze, at the 2010 Abu Dhabi Art fair for around \$250,000. But he also “has a truly international appeal,” Waterhouse says, because his references are sufficiently abstract to appeal to viewers of all faiths.

After graduating from Tehran’s School of Fine Arts in 1956, Tanavoli studied off and on in Italy for several years, returning with modern creations he’d made of salvaged metal and detritus. “People were shocked,” he said at a talk at the Asia Society in New York last year. “They didn’t even want to call them sculptures.” To the Iranian eye, accustomed to “fine things,” he said, the works looked like “monstrosities.” But they caught on. In 1958 the artist was included in the first Tehran Biennial, which led to an invitation to show at the Venice Biennale in 1960. It was an important moment for Iranian artists, at a venue where influential American curators, including MOMA’s Alfred Barr, acquired work. Soon after, Tanavoli started a studio in his native city, which he named Atelier Kaboud, and began putting together small exhibitions for local artists.

In June 1961, at a show he organized in a bank in Tehran, Tanavoli met Abby Weed Grey, a Minnesota native who had developed a passion for Iranian contemporary art after attending the second Tehran Biennial, in 1960. Grey was so impressed with the bold modernist work that she arranged a visit to Atelier Kaboud and walked out with Tanavoli’s *Myth*, 1961, a powerful work in gouache, ink, and gilt on paper. A new friendship was born: Tanavoli would teach Grey about art and Iran, while she would go on to collect nearly 80 of his works, a cache that would become the foundation of the Grey Art Gallery holdings at New York University. Grey also arranged a visiting artist post for Tanavoli at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where he spent two and a half years, by his own estimation some of his most productive. “It was there I got my formation,” he said during his Asia Society presentation.

At that time, Tanavoli began experimenting with calligraphy, hoping to distill the essence of his message. He eventually settled on *heech*. Although Tanavoli has issued

dozens, perhaps hundreds, of works incorporating the symbol over the past four decades, sculptures including the character remain the most sought after, says Lederer, who notes that these pieces sell more swiftly than Tanavoli’s more overtly Islamic works. With the *heeches* in particular,” he says, “there’s an abstract quality to them that transcends a specific culture.”

Beyond the *heech*, Tanavoli draws on other elements of Shia culture that factor in the Saqqakhaneh movement, whose name is derived from a type of shrinelike fountain structure often enclosed by a metal grille. Iranians would come to these public fountains not only for water but to make vows or to ritually fasten a lock on the grille “to lock up problems,” Tanavoli explains. With their deep cultural meaning, »



FROM LEFT, CHRISTIE'S; WATERHOUSE & DODD

locks are a particular fascination for the artist, who has amassed a substantial collection of them. He has even published books on locks, as well as tomes on Iranian rugs and weavings. Earlier this year, Meem Gallery in Dubai mounted a show of rugs of Tanavoli's own creation.

For a fledgling collector, "a *heech* would be perfect" Waterhouse says. "It's completely recognizable and unique to Tanavoli, available in bronze and fiberglass and in different sizes," at prices ranging from about \$30,000 to \$1 million. Waterhouse & Dodd has a 15-inch *Heech in a Cage* in bronze from 2006, from an edition of six, for \$52,000. Elliott Louis has several comparable works. The most valuable pieces—large bronzes that are unique or from smaller editions—are harder to come by these days, according to Waterhouse.

Lederer observes that with Tanavoli's market having come so far so fast, few periods remain unexplored. But he says collectors could look to the artist's rugs and to works that predate the *heech*. "If I had unlimited funds," Lederer says, "I would look for the early works done in his foundry."

"From a market perspective, he's almost been a victim of his own success," says Lina Lazaar Jameel, an international contemporary art specialist at Sotheby's who recently headed a sale of contemporary work in Doha. Although Tanavoli has had some impressive results at auction in recent years (the 59-inch-high bronze

*Poet and Cage*, 2008, exceeded its estimate of \$300,000 to \$400,000 to earn \$1,022,500 at Christie's Dubai in April 2010), his auction prices haven't come close to the high-water mark set by *The Wall (Oh, Persepolis)*, which sold at the height of the market. Partly, Jameel says, that's because "the collectors who own the very best are not ready to part with them yet. I think it'll take us a few more years until, at least on the secondary market, we'll be able to see those gems again."

This dearth may lead current market watchers to underestimate Tanavoli's value, she says. "We end up presenting more of his later works, or smaller works, or larger editions that don't necessarily reflect the quality of what the artist is all about," she explains.

Works that have come to market recently, says Hala Khayat, specialist in modern and contemporary Arab, Iranian, and Turkish art at Christie's, tend to be more "academic" fare, suitable for in-depth collectors. In April Christie's offered four works by the artist at its Modern and Contemporary Arab, Iranian, and Turkish Art sale in



The first in an edition of six, this polished bronze *Heech*, 2005–07, trumped its estimate of \$61,200 to \$102,000 when it sold for \$177,306 at Sotheby's London in October 2007. *Hand III*, 2006, below, issued in an edition of 12, is available from the Elliott Louis Gallery, in Vancouver, for \$21,000.

Dubai. Among them were three small pieces from the 1960s, two in ceramic and one in bronze, that earned \$20,000 to \$35,000 each, meeting or slightly besting their estimates. "They're really very special," Khayat says, but "not the most commercial." The fourth piece, a 41-inch bronze from 2008, *Poet and the Key*, went for \$147,750, within its estimate of \$100,000 to \$150,000.

Five days later at Sotheby's Doha, a 73-inch 2007 bronze, *Walls and Locks*, from an edition of three, failed to sell, a disappointment that Jameel dismisses as an understandable valley following years of peak performance. It will be interesting to see how the market responds when eight works by the artist go on view as part of the "Iran Modern" show at the Asia Society Museum in September. □



## From the Files

+ **Melissa Chiu**, director of the **Asia Society Museum** in New York, calls Tanavoli a pioneer whose work "sits very comfortably" with that of younger Iranian artists who have benefited from his success. Eight of his sculptures will be among more than 100 works dating from the 1950s to the 1970s that will be showcased in "Iran Modern" at the museum September 6, 2013–January 5, 2014.

+ In reference to his never-ending exploration of the *heech*, Tanavoli said, "I'm a repetitive artist. I never had any revolution in my work. I started from somewhere, and I'm still continuing."

+ "My calligraphy's terrible," Tanavoli added. "You don't even want to look at it."