



Prisoners in Chain

Heaven and Hell

Nosrati continued that in the memoir of Dr. Hossein Khatibi-Nouri, the former CEO of the Red Crescent Society of Iran, it is mentioned that Sepah Bank, in its early years of establishment, intended to purchase the building, however due to the historical value of the edifice and the artistic activities of San'ati, this plan was cancelled. "During that time, there was such a high demand for seeing his artworks that a portion of the financial resources of the society was obtained through the museum's ticket sales," he said. Ali Akbar San'ati Museum, also known as the 13th Aban Museum, has been popular for a long time due to one of its artworks depicting people in heaven and hell. Nosrati mentioned that seventy years ago, when many people did not even have family photos, the existence of a museum featuring a three-dimensional representation of heaven and hell was highly attractive and significant. "A number of elderly people who are presently visiting the museum say that seeing this place during their childhood had a deep impact on them, in such a way that since then they have imagine heaven and hell like that. Parts of the artworks had been destroyed in the past; however, due to their historical significance, we tried to renovate and revive them in the best possible manner," he added. Nosrati stated that nearly half of the museum's visitors are returning to reminisce about their previous visits. Many visitors have multi-generational memories associated with the museum; for example, some people who toured the museum in 1966, and took photos with the statue of Shah Abbas Safavid, now return with their grandchildren to create new memories and relive the past.



Abolqasem Ferdowsi

A narrative artist

San'ati is recognized as one of the pioneers of modern sculpture in Iran. His artistic journey began under the mentorship of Abolhassan Khan Sediqi, a student of Kamal-ol-Molk, a renowned Iranian painter (1847-1940). Notably, San'ati stands out as one of the earliest contemporary realistic artists who not only excelled in sculpting but also introduced innovative styles and schools in the realm of watercolor painting. When discussing the numerous artworks displayed across various sections of the museum, Nosrati emphasized their narrative nature, with each piece conveying a distinct story. As a narrative artist, San'ati skillfully imbues his sculptures with storytelling elements. Consequently, each masterpiece unfolds a specific narrative and comprises several sculptures that depict incidents or events. For instance, his work "Prisoners in Chain" (*Zendanian Dar Band* in Persian) comprises approximately 80 sculptures, while "The Disheartened" (*Sooteh Delan*) portrays several artists and promi-

nent figures of his time, including the esteemed poet Mohammad Taghi Bahar (1886-1951 CE) and Allameh Dehkhoda, a prominent Iranian literary writer, philologist, and lexicographer (1879-1956 CE) and Abolqasem Ferdowsi a Persian poet and the author of *Shahnameh* (940-1020 CE). Nosrati further elaborated that the museum encompasses two floors, with sculptures adorning the ground floor, and oil and watercolor paintings, along with several half-body sculptures and busts, housed on the second floor. Notably, the museum boasts around 400 sculptures and 80 paintings. A significant portion of the artworks represent the masses of people, their struggles, and societal concerns, featuring sculptures depicting various ordinary individuals, from laborers to barbers and shoemakers. Additionally, there are sculptures of rulers alongside notable Iranian and foreign cultural, historical, and political figures, including those of Shah Abbas Safavid, Nader Shah Afshar, Lenin, and Tolstoy.



Ali Akbar San'ati

Early hardships

Born into a financially disadvantaged family in Kerman, the artist faced early hardships, losing his father during childhood. "His mother, affectionately called *bibi*, earned a living by spinning thread, and many nights this artist would fall sleep to the sound of the spinning wheel, which acted as a comforting lullaby to his ears," said Nosrati. Unable to afford his upbringing, his mother entrusted him to an orphanage in Kerman, established by a benevolent person, Haj Ali Akbar San'ati, a wealthy man who generously bestowed his last name on the children at the orphanage, allowing them to pursue education and obtain identity cards. A statue depicting him as a baby in the arms of the orphanage founder is situated in a corner of the museum narrating the tale of that day. "The baby was restless and persistently pleaded for his mother to take him back. However, when Haj Ali Akbar tenderly embraced him and pressed his face to his chest, assuring him that this was his new home, it felt as if he were being born again. The statue portrays their initial encounter," he said. When San'ati's artistic talent was discovered at the orphanage, he traveled to Tehran at a young age to study at the Darolfonoon (Iran's first center of learning), driven by the aspiration to learn from Kamal-ol-Molk. However, during that period, Kamal-ol-Molk was exiled to Neishabur. Thus, at the recommendation of Abolhassan Sediqi, one of most distinguished students of Kamal-ol-Molk, San'ati turned to sculpture. Due to the poverty he experienced in his childhood, he always sought to be gen-

erous and supportive of the poor. In his sculptures, he depicted delicately and artistically, the suffering of the poor and distressed people in their facial expressions, clothing, and physical posture. His first artwork, "The Jobless Family Man," is housed and preserved in a section of this museum. Nosrati noted that this masterpiece was created in 1946, in the context of events taking place in Iran before and after World War II, precisely in the years when Iran was invaded from the north and south. During that period, conditions deteriorated to the point where even military barracks did not have bread to feed their soldiers. In these circumstances, San'ati depicted the members of a family, including a man sitting with his wife, his mother-in-law, his own mother, and children in the street. The man's eyes and facial expression clearly convey a sense of depression. Reflecting the time, this work portrays the pain and suffering of the people. San'ati's famous work, "Prisoners in Chain," consist of approximately 80 sculptures created in 1949. The emotions and feelings depicted on the faces of these sculptures have been intricately designed, capturing the viewer's attention to the extent that one can spend a significant amount of time engrossed in the details. Nosrati described this work as a symbol of the museum, showcasing a large number of individuals, each representing a specific segment of society. Many of these people are depicted with chains around their necks, suggesting they are under social pressure. Some even wear a bitter smile, depicting a society in captivity during a specific period of Iranian history.

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Shah Abbas Safavid



Nader Shah Afshar