

Massoud Shojai Tabatabai inspects a cartoon that depicts US President Donald Trump (C) as a pig and surrounded by several other pigs, one wearing his famous MAGA hat, with the US Capitol building and the American flag on fire in the background.
IRAN DAILY

with a flood of images showing war, destruction, death and civilian suffering. These images spread across social media at an astonishing speed, but their constant repetition can lead to a dangerous phenomenon: the normalization of human suffering.
Audiences may see countless images yet gradually lose their sensitivity to what they are witnessing.
I believe cartoons and political caricatures can offer a distinctive response to this numbness. A photograph captures an actual moment of a tragedy, while a cartoon can reveal the deeper meaning hidden within it. By choosing a particular idea, symbol or contradiction, a cartoonist can move audiences beyond simply looking at an image and encourage them to think about the causes, responsibilities and consequences of what has happened.

Cartoons are often described as a universal language, yet audiences interpret images through the lens of their own culture, religion, history and political experience. How often have you encountered different interpretations of the same image? Can a cartoon that is immediately understood in Iran convey a very different message to audiences in Europe, the United States or Asia?
Absolutely. Throughout my years of working in international cartooning and caricature, particularly through curating competitions involving artists from different countries, I have repeatedly encountered the fact that a single image can generate different interpretations across cultures. In my view, this is not a limitation of cartooning; rather, it can be one of its most valuable capacities for fostering dialogue between nations.
I regard cartooning as a universal language, but that does not mean every audience necessarily interprets an image in the same way. Like spoken and written language, visual art has its own cultural signs and codes. A historical symbol, a political figure, a visual reference to a proverb or even a hand gesture may be immediately familiar and meaningful to an Iranian audience, while requiring additional cultural or historical context for viewers in Europe, the United States or East Asia.

The war in Gaza and the Palestinian question have become major subjects of debate in international art and media. How can political cartoonists draw global attention to Palestinian suffering, the occupation and the human cost of war? At the same time, how can they maintain a clear distinction between criticizing the policies of the Israeli cabinet and resorting to ethnic or religious stereotypes?
In my view, the Palestinian question and the war in Gaza are among the issues that most clearly demonstrate the social and humanitarian responsibility of cartooning.
When we witness the actions of the Israeli regime and see the suffering of the people of Gaza, families being displaced, thousands of innocent children losing their lives and homes being destroyed, cartoonists can use the language of images to draw public attention to the inhumane dimensions of this crisis. These realities are sometimes pushed to the margins by systems of domination, the abuse of power and media censorship.

Beyond your work as a cartoonist, you have curated international exhibitions and served on the juries of major competitions. Based on your experience, has Iranian political cartooning succeeded in establishing a presence on the international stage? What distinctive artistic qualities set Iranian cartoonists apart from their counterparts around the world?
Yes, absolutely. Throughout my professional career, I have consistently sought to create opportunities for Iranian cartoonists to gain international recognition alongside leading artists from around the world and to engage in artistic dialogue with them.
For me, curating international competitions, exhibitions and specialized events has never been merely about putting together an art program. It has also been a way to showcase the potential of Iranian cartooning and establish lasting connections between Iranian artists and the international community.
To illustrate the scope of these activities, it is worth looking at the past two years. During this period, we were involved in curating seven major international events in cartooning and caricature. These included the 12th Tehran International Cartoon & Caricature Biennial, the Third International Trumpism Cartoon and Caricature Contest, the Third International Holocaust Cartoon Contest, the Terror Online Contest, competitions related to International Quds Day and the Nakba Day, curated in cooperation with Iran and Egypt, as well as an international competition focusing on the boycott of the Israeli regime at the Olympic Games.
With their diverse themes and approaches, these events provided opportunities for artists from different countries to express their views on global political, social and humanitarian issues through the language of cartoons.

With the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI), producing political and satirical images is no longer limited to artists with years of drawing experience. AI tools can generate images in seconds that might once have taken hours or days to create. Do you see this development as a threat to professional cartoonists or an opportunity to expand the art form? In an age of AI-generated imagery, what gives a political cartoon its authenticity and credibility?
In cartooning, we must distinguish between the ability to produce an image and the ability to create an idea. Artificial intelligence tools can generate a complex, visually striking and technically convincing image within seconds. However, cartooning is not simply about creating something beautiful or unusual.
Before it is a drawing skill, cartooning is the art of identifying a contradiction, understanding a situation and expressing an independent perspective on the world. The fundamental questions remain: Where does the idea come from? What does it criticize? And how does it relate to real human experience?



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What advice would you give to young cartoonists in Iran and around the world who want to use their art to challenge political power? At a time when governments can swiftly react to criticism and social media exposes artists to intense public scrutiny, how can cartoonists preserve their independence, maintain artistic standards and still make a meaningful impact on public opinion?
My first piece of advice is to study. Political cartoonists cannot offer profound and lasting criticism without understanding history, society, economics, international relations and the mechanisms of power. Sometimes a news story may appear extremely important on the surface, while its real significance lies in a contradiction hidden beneath it.
My second recommendation is to preserve intellectual independence. Independence does not mean that artists should avoid taking a position. On the contrary, many enduring works of art have emerged from clear and consciously held positions. What matters is that artists should be able to express their views through well-considered ideas and effective visual arguments.
Social media allows us to reach audiences around the world in a very short time. However, this environment can also push artists towards producing work designed merely to attract attention, provoke controversy or generate more views. I believe artistic quality should never be sacrificed for a speedy publication. An idea that takes hours or days to develop may be far more valuable than an image created solely as an immediate reaction to a news story.
My third recommendation is for young artists to develop their own visual language. Imitating successful artists can be part of the learning process, but it should never become the ultimate goal. Every artist should draw on their lived experience, social environment, cultural background and personal way of seeing the world to develop an independent visual identity.
I would also urge young artists to take international networking seriously. Participating in competitions, exhibiting their work, engaging with artists from other countries and becoming familiar with specialized media can open up new horizons. However, international recognition should not be the sole measure of an artist's worth. What matters most is consistency, intellectual growth and a commitment to artistic quality.
I am very optimistic about the future of Iran's younger generation of cartoonists, provided they do not lose sight of critical thinking, study, careful observation and human responsibility while learning to use new tools and take advantage of technological developments.