

**SOHEILA SOKHANVARI:  
WE COULD BE HEROES...  
EDUCATION GUIDE**



**5 OCTOBER 2023 - 4 FEBRUARY 2024**

**WEDNESDAY - SUNDAY 12PM-5PM**

**THE HEONG GALLERY**

**DOWNING COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE**

**FREE ADMISSION**





## About the Artist

Soheila Sokhanvari is a contemporary artist, currently based in Cambridge. She was born in Shiraz in Iran. In 1978, at fourteen years old, she came to boarding school in England. That was the year before the 1979 Islamic Revolution which would make Iran almost unrecognisable. Her multimedia art practice focuses on pre-revolutionary Iran of 1979, in her words, “telling the story of an era that’s already gone”. She takes inspiration from Persian miniature artists as well as Mexican artists such as Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington, who use Magic Realism and Surrealism to mix together the personal, poetic and political.

Sokhanvari did not always think of herself as an artist. In 1986, she graduated with a degree in Biochemistry, and she ended up working as a research scientist for Cambridge University. From 2001 to 2011, she retrained as an artist at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelsea College of Art and Design, and Goldsmiths, University of London. She has spoken about the importance of taking that leap of faith – “to actually end up doing what you really love to do, that takes a lot of faith in yourself” – and admits that she still experiences imposter syndrome. She has always said that “I make art for myself. I would still make it even if nobody looked at it”. Nonetheless, her recent solo show *Rebel, Rebel* (2022-23) at the Curve Gallery in London's Barbican Centre was seen by over 75,000 visitors.

This education guide is designed to help viewers to look and learn, to start conversations and inspire creation.





# Look and Tell

Due to their small scale and richness of detail, Sokhanvari's paintings are great for **close-looking** exercises.

Pick one artwork in the gallery (or, if you're not in the gallery, one from this booklet or online) and look at it for ten minutes.

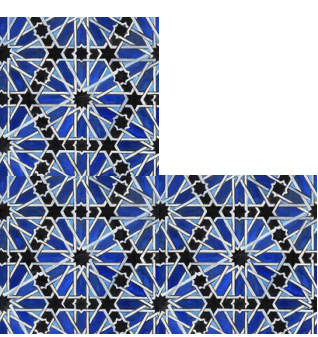
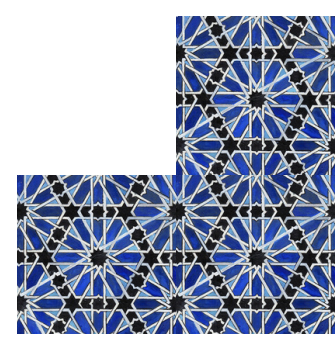
**What do you notice?** Take notes or even sketch the image. Reflect on your first impression and how it develops as you become more familiar with the artwork.

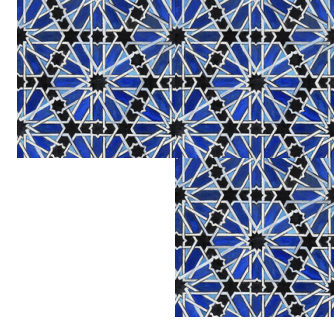
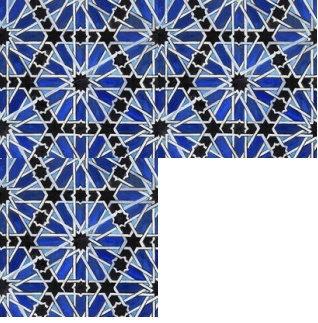
## **How would you describe the artwork to someone else?**

If you have the time and resources, prepare a five minute presentation on your chosen artwork.

Artworks can be analysed in various different ways.

Here are some starting points:

- **Subject matter:**  
If it is a portrait of a person, how do they look? How do you think they feel? Who do you imagine they are? Are they a real person? When and where could they be from?
  - **Material:** What is it made of? Can you tell from observation?
  - **Technique:** How do you think it was made?
  - **Style:** Realism? Abstraction? Can we categorise the artwork?
  - **Composition:** What about the use of space and the position of the subject within the image?
  - **Colour and Line:** How are these elements used in this work? Think about the choices made by the artist, and their effect.
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As well as **formal** analysis (a description of the work of art solely based on what you can see) visual analysis also involves **symbolic** and **contextual** analysis.

- Look for details that you can tie to wider themes or that you associate with certain ideas.
- Make biographical links and connect what you can see to the context that you can read more about in the following pages.



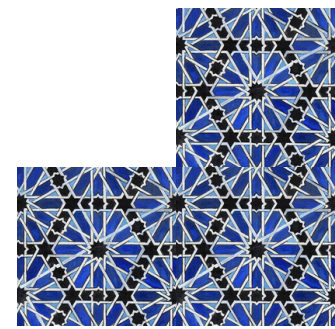
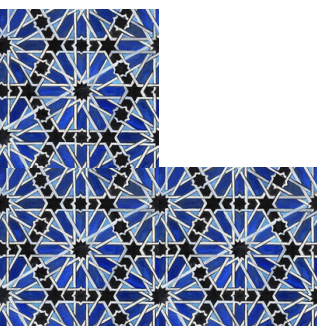
Ask yourself, what does it mean? Is there a story here?  
What do you think are the artist's intentions?



Don't be afraid to express your own opinion. Sokhanvari has spoken about allowing art to be open to interpretation: "because we are all coming with our own experiences [...] it will never be seen by two people in the same way."

*"I can see... which suggests..."*

*"I think that... because..."*





Soheila Sokhanvari  
***She's a Rainbow***  
***(Portrait of***  
***Shoorangiz***  
***Tabatabaee)***  
2023  
Egg tempera  
on Calf vellum  
16.3 x 13.9 cm

The title tells us that this is a portrait of Shoorangiz Tabatabaee. Who is Shoorangiz Tabatabaee? Tabatabaee is an Iranian actress. She rose to stardom in the 1970s. However, the 1979 revolution in Iran brought an end to her success, as women were no longer allowed to act, sing, or dance in public. Tabatabaee was called to Evin Prison (the political prison north of Tehran) and forced to sign a letter of penitence, repenting her sins.

The title of this work comes from the 1967 Rolling Stones song, *She's a Rainbow*, which includes the lyric: 'Have you seen her all in gold, Like a queen in days of old?'. Sokhanvari paints Tabatabaee as a golden-haired beauty sitting in a colourful garden. Due to Tabatabaee's bright eyeshadow and outfit, and the reference to the Rolling Stones in the title, we can associate this image with the sixties and seventies – an era which is often seen as one of liberation, in the West. However, the black and white aspect reminds us of an old photograph and might add a hint of melancholy, memorialising those 'days of old'. While many of Sokhanvari's portraits celebrate female icons like Tabatabaee they also grieve the silencing of these women's powerful voices. Therefore, Sokhanvari uses portraiture to tell a true story of collective trauma through the narrative of the individual.

**How does this information help us to understand the exhibition's title, *We Could Be Heroes...?***



Soheila Sokhanvari  
***Conquest of the  
Garden***  
2016  
Egg tempera  
on vellum  
20 x 15 cm

Not all of the women in Sokhanvari's portrait paintings were famous; this is a portrait of Sokhanvari's mother who is just as much one of her heroes. The painting is based on a photograph of Sokhanvari's mother, from 1967. When Sokhanvari left her family home for England in 1978, her mother packed a family photo album in her case. Sokhanvari regularly returns to old family photographs as a source for her art. In this painting from 2016, of a woman sat in European dress in a courtyard decorated with Islamic tiles, the artist preserves a snapshot of modern life in Iran before the Islamic Revolution and a personal memory of her mother. From the plants in the borders rise clenched fists – a long-standing symbol of solidarity in the fight against oppression. The imagery and title of this artwork were inspired by a poem by the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (1934–67):

**I am not talking about timorous whispering  
in the dark.**

**I am talking about daytime and open windows  
and fresh air and a stove in which useless things burn  
and land which is fertile  
with a different planting  
and birth and evolution and pride.**

Forough Farrokhzad, *Conquest of the Garden*, 1962 (trans. Michael C. Hillman, 1987).

In addition to Sokhanvari's portraits of female icons from pre-revolutionary Iran with their feminist themes, you can find in her depictions of men a further exploration of that time and society, its fashion trends and gender norms.

**Turn your attention to the three men in the central panel of the triptych titled *Men of Order*. Do these people look happy?**



Soheila Sokhanvari

***Men of Order (Triptych)***

2014

Egg tempera on panel

59 x 108 x 3.5 cm (open)

59 x 54 x 7 cm (closed)

They certainly look a bit bored and maybe even uncomfortable. Take the man sitting on the left: he's wearing quite a clash of patterns, sandal shoes that don't really go with a smart blazer jacket, and his trousers don't seem to fit properly.

This is an image of men in 1936 wearing the Western style of dress that was new to Iran at the time. The then ruler of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi (first Shah of the Imperial State of Iran and father of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi), insisted on the Westernisation of dress as part of his project of modernisation (in a world where modern was read as Western). These three 'Men of Order' are therefore three men following the orders of the Iranian monarchy (the Pahlavi Dynasty). The title comes from a book on this topic, *Men of Order: Authoritarian Modernization under Atatürk and Reza Shah* (T. Atabaki and E. J. Zürcher, 2004), so it's a good idea to look up more of the titles of Sokhanvari's artworks if you think they could provide a helpful clue to understanding their subject matter.

The Pahlavi Dynasty was overthrown in the 1979 Islamic Revolution which replaced the Imperial State of Iran with the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran. However, mandatory dress codes were replaced with mandatory dress clothes; these colourful patterns were now stripped out of men's clothing and the hijab became compulsory for all women in Iran.

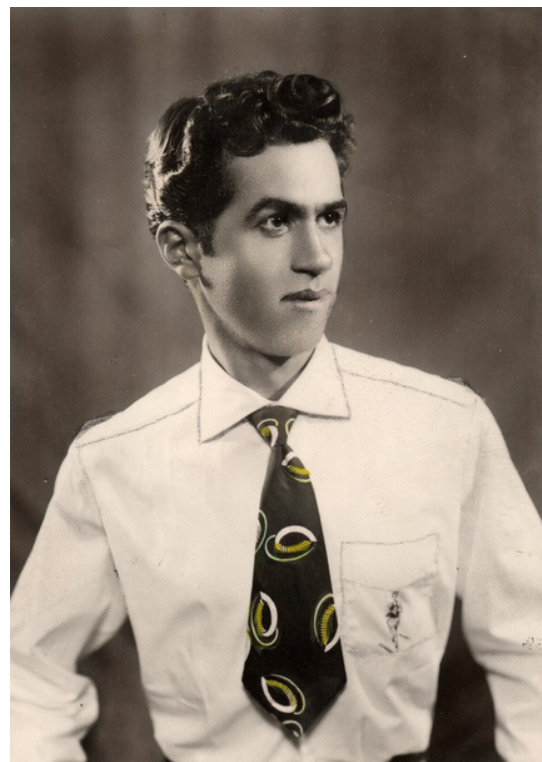


← A photo of a women's march in Tehran, Iran on International Women's Day, 1979, which transformed into a protest against the compulsory hijab decree.





Combining historical and biographical storytelling and continuing to look back upon the technicolour culture of pre-revolutionary Iran, in the side panels of the *Men of Order* triptych Sokhanvari used as her source material photographs from her father's modelling career from the mid 1950s to late 60s. Her father was a fashion designer. Sokhanvari remembers he would bring a sketchbook to see the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* – to take in and then tailor the latest Western trends to better suit his customers. He was one of her biggest influences; he taught her how to paint.



Photographs of her father, Ali-Mohammed Sokhanvari, modelling.

## Meaning and Materiality

As well as in the subject matter and the title of the artwork, meaning is carried in the materials used to make each artwork.

Many of Sokhanvari's portraits are painted in egg tempera on calf vellum. This traditional technique, as used by Persian miniature artists, contrasts with the modern clothing of her subjects and the naturalistic style in which they have been painted. Sokhanvari grinds her own pigments and mixes them with Burford Brown egg yolks, white vinegar and distilled water, then carefully applies her paint in layers, with a fine brush, onto vellum. Egg tempera dries quickly so she often has to make fresh paint; painting is a slow, ritualistic labour of love. Painting on calf vellum has significance as the calf is symbolic of sacrifice in monotheistic religions so it becomes a symbol of the individual's sacrifice.



The exhibition also features works from Sokhanvari's crude oil miniature series. Vast reserves of crude oil were discovered in Iran in 1908 and continue to be a precious commodity in our energy-hungry world. The thirst for crude oil has been a cause for conflict in Iran and a source of their struggle for democracy and freedom. The sepia tones evoke a comforting sense of nostalgia which we should see through to acknowledge our complicity in the drive for oil and power.

# Creative Activities

## Materials that Matter

As we have seen, Sokhanvari uses very unique materials; materials which carry meaning. What materials could we use to make a comment on the political, economic, and environmental issues that our society faces today?

Share your ideas and put them into practice.



Crude oil and pigments in the artist's studio.





## Layering Meaning

Print a photograph of a person – it could be a friend, family member, or celebrity – in black and white. Then, paint on top of the photograph, using your imagination to create a new background. You might also want to add to their outfit. Try to show their character, hint at a backstory, and bring the portrait to life.



## Practising Pattern

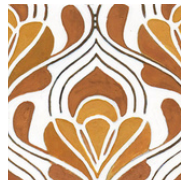
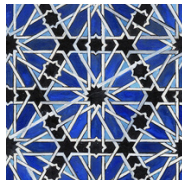
Get a piece of paper, card or recycled cardboard and cut shapes out of it. Use this as a stencil by applying 'pigment' through the cut-out holes. You can colour through the hole or outline it and then enjoy colouring in the shapes after taking away the stencil. Line up the stencil in the spot next to where you last used it to create your own repeating pattern.



## Drawing from photos, drawing on memories.

Sokhanvari views the act of drawing from her old family photographs as a means of reliving the past. Have a go at drawing or painting from an old photograph. Does it help you to remember?

Soheila Sokhanvari  
**Daughters' Father**  
2016  
Crude oil on paper  
29.5 x 21.5 cm



Thinking about **Identity**.

**“I feel like I’m a cultural collage of two opposing cultures and yet there is this wonderful overlap of humanity.” (Sokhanvari, 2021)**

Discuss in relation to the exhibition *We Could Be Heroes...*

# notes



**notes**



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