

Tehran art set to get satisfaction

IRAN

By **HOWARD SCHNEIDER**
in Tehran

Mick Jagger, scraggly haired and slightly ghoulish in four Andy Warhol silkscreens, stared at Fatimah Noorbash, 23, like cave paintings from a lost world, and made about as much sense to her.

He is a British rock singer, a fellow visitor to Tehran's Museum of Contemporary Art informed her. He is associated with wild sex and drugs and all sorts of misbehaviour. Many men in America would like to be him.

"I'm sorry," she said in a polite deadpan, as she processed this new bit of information about Western culture. "I'm really surprised such a person has been put here."

Surprises are popping up all over this city, as Iran's cultural and social environment continues its shift from the near-medieval restrictions of the Islamic revolution's first years to what is perhaps its more natural state as a curious and intellectually engaged metropolis.

Iranians love to talk, think and read, and the same tendencies that have pushed the country towards more democracy and openness in recent elections are finding expression in art museums, music halls and other venues.

A while back, the best-selling book here was a Persian translation of Pink Floyd lyrics. Bootleg videos and music tapes are widespread, and what isn't hawked on the black market can be downloaded from the Internet.

And at this year's Fadjr Music Festival, a performer was Khateri Parvaneh, 69, a diva who was among Iran's most popular singers before the fall of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi but who has been allowed to sing again only since the 1997 election of reformist President Mohammed Khatemi. "If you close the doors of the places where

However, rules against solo females performing for men still limit her performances to women.

The Tehran Museum is a prominent institutional example of the changes under way, displaying a collection of Western art that for years was stowed in the basement because of political and religious sensitivities.

It's a world-class collection, assembled in the late 1970s by the Pahlavi dynasty, reflecting both the extravagance that helped



bring down the monarchy and the intellectual tastes that Iranians still privately acknowledge were high-calibre.

The Shah's wife handed a wad of money to one of her cousins, an architect, and he acquired 400 works — from Picasso to British and American pop artists — that only now are being fully assessed and displayed.

Most remarkable, says the museum's director, Sami Azar, is that the shows he is mounting, including the works by Warhol, have met no opposition or protest.

Local artists say the museum's efforts are intellectually liberating.