

Lifestyle



A view of colored pencils displayed at the shop of Iranian merchant Mohammad Rafi at the Grand Bazaar in Tehran.



Mohammad Rafi, a seller of colored pencils at the Grand Bazaar in Tehran, reaches for a pencil at his shop.



Mohammad Rafi, a seller of colored pencils at the Grand Bazaar in Tehran, sits at his shop.

In a dimly lit corner of Tehran's Grand Bazaar, Mohammad Rafi is surrounded by all colors of the rainbow in his tiny shop that sells nothing but art pencils. The world may have gone digital, but Rafi has stayed true to his passion of the past 35 years, surrounded by thousands of pencils in every hue and shade imaginable.

meter (30 square feet) shop in the market's arts and crafts section where he has welcomed generations of customers.

"Every time a customer shows up, I enjoy it, even if they don't buy anything," smiled Rafi. He then spent 10 minutes advising a schoolgirl in search of two pencils, one blue, one orange, who tried



Mohammad Rafi, a seller of colored pencils at the Grand Bazaar in Tehran, assists customers at his shop.



With the pencils stacked from floor to ceiling, his tiny cubicle has become a photogenic splash of color, hidden deep in the market known as a "city within a city". "I don't know how many pencils there are but I have about 200 colors available," said the proud 50-year-old owner of the Medad Rafi (Rafi's pencils) shop.

Finding his shop requires a veritable treasure hunt through the maze of alleys and passages of the storied market in the heart of the Iranian capital. Rafi himself takes up much of the three square

out different types, doodling on a drawing pad on the counter.

Colors and textures

"Depending on what they want to do with it, I advise customers on the color, the texture or the brand," said Rafi, who only sells the pencils individually, not by the box. He is proud to cater to all budgets, offering domestically made pencils and ones imported from Europe and America.

"The most expensive pencil costs 100,000 toman (around two euros)," he



said, "but it is one of the best." A drawing lover since childhood, Rafi has always adored pencils and, after his technical studies in the 1980s, began his professional life in a pencil manufacturing company before opening his shop.

He knows that, in the days of high-tech and touch-screens, the humble colored pencil has had its golden age, look-

ing back nostalgically at the past century when all children carried them in their school bags. Unlike many other shop owners in the bazaar, he will not pass on the business to his son, a trained physician who "is not interested in this work".

Until he retires, however, Rafi plans to keep serving his loyal customers, meeting their every creative need, including

even "some pencils that are no longer produced". "Fortunately, I have a large stock" accumulated over the years, Rafi said, proudly brandishing the oldest pencil he has, "made 72 years ago". — AFP



(From left) Iranian actor Hossein Soleimani Golijan, Iranian actor Farzin Mohaddes, Iranian director Alireza Khatami, Iranian actor Majid Salehi, Iranian director Ali Asgari, Iranian actress Faezeh Rad and Iranian actress Sadaf Asgari pose during a photocall for the film "Ayeh Haye Zamini" (Terrestrial Verses) at the 76th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France. — AFP

## The invisible face of Iranian power comes to Cannes

A new film at Cannes, showing the everyday maddening frustration of dealing with Iranian authorities, reflects the "absurdity" of life in that country, say the makers. "Terrestrial Verses" is a unique look inside daily life in Iran — short snapshots of people arguing with authority figures who are never shown on-camera.

The vignettes are both horrible and darkly comic — a man forced to strip down and explain his tattoos while applying for a driving license, or a poor worker made to recite Quranic verses to get a construction job. Co-directors Ali Asgari and Alireza Khatami told AFP they are all drawn from the real-life experiences of friends and family, and will be instantly familiar to their fellow Iranians.

Indeed, the idea came together after Khatami was refused permission to make

a previous version of the script — reflecting another scene in the movie where a director must hack his screenplay to pieces to placate the censors. "We were walking one night after my film was shut down and we were talking about some of the absurd conversations we have had with the authorities," Khatami told AFP in Cannes, where the film was playing in the Un Certain Regard section.

The directors insist it is not a direct attack on Iran's political system in particular. "We are interested in the way the system functions. But you pick any negotiation of any individual with the authority in any country and put it on a camera, it becomes absurd," Khatami said. "France, Switzerland, Lebanon, America — every country has ridiculous ways it exerts power over its citizens and we individuals find a way to negotiate it."

Hopeful for first time

The shoot was interrupted midway through by the outbreak of mass protests following the killing of a young woman in police custody last September. "We stopped everything for a couple of months because of what was going on," said Khatami. "It was very sad to see this prophecy of the film coming to the streets."

At the same time, it has given them hope for the country's future — even if they are currently staying abroad. "This is the first time in my life I'm hopeful. Because this generation is aware," Khatami said. The protests are "definitely a tipping point," he added. "We saw a society come together. There was a sense of unity and with that comes a lot of hope." — AFP

## 'Waterloo' at Eurovision 2024? ABBA stars say 'no way'

Two members of ABBA have insisted in an interview to air in Britain on Thursday that the Swedish pop icons won't perform at next year's Eurovision Song Contest in their homeland. Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, one half of ABBA, downplayed the prospect despite Sweden hosting Eurovision on the 50th anniversary of the band's win — the country's first — with their breakthrough hit "Waterloo". The Nordic nation is set to stage the world's biggest live music event for the seventh time after Swedish singer Loreen won this year's contest, hosted by Britain on behalf of war-torn Ukraine.

Her victory at the eccentric, much-loved competition in Liverpool this month prompted immediate speculation that ABBA could take to the stage next year. However, in an interview with the BBC's Newsnight program, Andersson said there is "no way" the group will make a celebratory performance or even appearance.

"I don't want to. And if I don't want to, the others won't. It's the same for all four of us. Someone says no — it's a no," he explained. Ulvaeus added: "We can celebrate 50 years of ABBA without us being on stage." ABBA — which also comprised Agnetha Faltskog and Anni-Frid Lyngstad, and is an acronym of their first names — shot to international fame after their 1974 Eurovision success.

The band went on to sell hundreds of millions of records and top the charts worldwide, including in the United States in 1977 with "Dancing Queen" —

their only stateside number one. Other global hits include "Super Trouper", "Money, Money, Money" and "Knowing Me, Knowing You". In 1981, the group released what they said would be a final album and split up the following year. But their success continued, notably with the compilation "ABBA Gold" released in 1992, and in 2021 they made a comeback, releasing their first new album in nearly 40 years.



Eurovision Song Contest winner Swedish singer Loreen holds the ESC trophy on stage to celebrate with fans at the Kungstradgarden park in Stockholm, Sweden.

'Surpassing every expectation'

They also launched a new concert format featuring de-aged digital avatars — dubbed "ABBAtars" — in London who perform their hits and resemble their 1979 selves. Ulvaeus and Andersson said the show's success was "surpassing every expectation". "We achieved more than we could ever hope for... seeing this happening after four or five years of work... and realizing that the audience actually connected to what was on stage," Andersson told the BBC. He added that he would like to take the show to Australia in the future. "It would feel good to go back there and say thank-you to Australians for supporting us from day one." — AFP



Swedish supergroup ABBA.



US rapper Fetty Wap poses in the press room during the 2015 MTV Movie Awards in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

## US rapper Fetty Wap sentenced to six years for drug trafficking

American rapper Fetty Wap was sentenced to six years in prison on Wednesday for trafficking drugs across the United States. The "Trap Queen" rapper born Willie Junior Maxwell II had pleaded guilty last year to distributing and possessing cocaine. New York prosecutors said he was part of a ring of six men that distributed more than 100 kilograms of cocaine, heroin, fentanyl and crack cocaine across Long Island and New Jersey between June 2019 and June 2020.

The men obtained the drugs on America's west coast and used the United States Postal Service and drivers with hidden vehicle compartments to transport the narcotics to New York. The substances were then distributed to dealers who sold them on Long Island and in New Jersey. The Justice Department described Maxwell, 31, as "a kilogram-level redistributor for the trafficking organization." — AFP