

Impact Statement

Celine Fong, Grade 11.
A Beacon of Hope, 2023.
Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 inches.
Rye Country Day School, Rye, NY
Unsung Hero: Abdol Hossein Sardari

As a 21st-century student and artist, I believe in the deep investigation of personal narratives to gain change-making role models and engage with powerful stories that can re-focus our evolving world. In reaffirming the unacknowledged heroes from the past, we have the power to amplify their contributions, preserve their memories, and better comprehend our collective history to engender a well-informed future. When I started the ARTEFFECT project, I wanted to tie what I was learning in school with powerful stories to humanize the textbook history I had only studied in class. Abdol Hossein Sardari's biography immediately sparked my interest, as I thought of *Schindler's List*, a movie I had watched last year; I remembered that although I was struck by its melancholic music and stark visuals, ultimately, the true narrative behind the movie was what captivated me. As I watched, I kept circling back to Schindler's unwavering dedication to his workers, purely out of his own moral pledge. Through these stories, I was moved by the human spirit and our ability to pursue acts of courage even in the darkest of times. As I further delved into Abdol Hossein Sardari's heroism, I was deeply touched by his empathy and sense of fidelity, experiencing the same sense of awe as I did while viewing the movie. In my opinion, in order to carry forth and commemorate his legacy, it is crucial to celebrate these resilient figures and recognize their accomplishments to best preserve their values and appreciate their intentions.

I am most inspired by Sardari's resolute determination in the face of peril, clearly reflected in his unwavering service and responsibility. As I kept researching his story, the instances of Sardari's upstanding character shine through and further emphasize his determination in protecting his people. Utilizing his wit and willingness to serve, he sacrificed his security throughout the war for the benefit of others even following the termination of his diplomat position, outmaneuvering the Nazis at their own game by finding the loopholes in their ideology. Even though he represented a belligerent nation in German-occupied France, Sardari stayed behind and continued to support the Jewish and Iranian population by offering to safeguard their belongings in a country that targeted them at every moment and supplying them with unauthorized passports to facilitate their escape. Instead of retreating to a life of privilege, Sardari strategized and capitalized on his political role to outsmart a deeply forceful and prejudiced government, actively resisting the Nazi authorities with his vigorous will. His constant integrity displays his commitment to aiding his constituents in every way possible. Thus, the genesis of my artwork originated at a place where I simply wanted to honor Mr. Sardari's humanitarian efforts and draw on his traits of altruism and resolution, especially since he refused to take any special credit for his contributions following the war. Additionally, I wanted to highlight his selflessness and intelligence in handling the complex wartime situation, as well as illustrate a small portion of the many lives he saved and the links he had forged with them.

I believe visual graphics are an essential tool to raise awareness and bring important stories to life because of their universal language: anyone can understand an artistic narrative no matter their background. Therefore, my primary focus for my artistic interpretation was to depict Sardari's story during the war through an accessible lens. Firstly, to set up the mood and location for my artistic account, I illustrated the environment and era centered around his story by adding iconic monuments such as the Eiffel Tower to set up the scene. Additionally, I chose a brown monochromatic color scheme for my entire piece to emulate the photographs from that period and adhere to the conventions of old images to make my artwork look more realistic.

Through my research, I also incorporated the accurate clothing and transportation methods of the 1940s as I wanted my piece to be historically accurate. The core of my painting lies in Sardari's portrait, as I wanted to showcase the unrecognized man behind the work and help my audience associate a face with his actions. I honed in on his gentle smile and compassionate features, making sure that he made comfortable eye contact with the viewer to symbolize his amiability. Additionally, I included his top hat to represent his background in diplomacy, placed next to a hand stamping passports to further highlight what he enacted with his authority. As another key component to his narrative is the demographic he saved, I presented many of them through the photograph in the top corner and the crowd of people leaving Paris safely in the foreground. Finally, to accentuate the hope Sardari embodied for many of the families leaving the city, I painted a shining light of life beaming down onto the Iranian Jewish population to catch the viewer's attention and provide contrast with the darker tones of the piece. This is complemented by a repeating motif of billowing clouds and steam to increase the sense of gentleness and softness in my painting, functioning as a symbol of promise and optimism. In today's ever-polarized society, Sardari's actions encourage me to focus on the positives in our world, connect with my community, and speak up about the matters I care about. Through learning more about his journey and evaluating a man who believed that his own agency could empower those around him, I truly believe that one person can make a significant difference and enact change even within the boundaries of systemic oppression. I am motivated and influenced by his sacrifices and personal responsibility, and I intend to celebrate his life by presenting at my school's Community Meeting and talking to my AP History class this month to educate my peers on his story and honor his legacy. Personally, I also want to exemplify his spirit by continuing to volunteer and give back to my school, helping out with aid efforts from disasters around the world, and creating intrapersonal bonds to strengthen the community around me.