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A Comparative Visual Analysis of Nineteenth-Century Iranian Portrait Photography and Persian Painting

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A Comparative Visual Analysis of Nineteenth-Century Iranian Portrait Photography and Persian Painting

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To the memory of Bahman Jalali (1944-2010) and to his wife Rana Javadi.

For my family: Luna, Mitra, Mani and Alireza Darvish

For my teachers: Prof. Dr. Kitty Zijlmans, Dr. Helen Westgeest and Prof. Dr. Just Jan Witkam

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INTRODUCTION

Field of research

The field of research of my dissertation is nineteenth-century Iranian portrait photography. The origin and motivation of this choice lies in my own work as photographer in Asia. After a two and half year of travel from Turkey to China by land, I came back to Spain in the Summer of 2000 with around sixty rolls of films, mostly black and white, and I published several portfolios and the catalogue of a solo exhibition about the work of women in Asia that opened in the Principe Felipe Museum in Valencia (2001). Many of the photographs showed women doing hard physical work (carrying bricks, breaking stones, etc.) and others performing daily life tasks like picking up or carrying water, cooking or taking care of children.

I sent the catalogue to an Iranian poet who liked it but remarked that in some of the photographs he could guess that I was a Western photographer. I did not really know what he exactly meant by that, but whatever it was, it concerned me for some time. It motivated me to finish my incipient career as a photographer and began a long period of reflection and study whose final result is this dissertation.

Asia has inspired and fascinated me for many years, first as a photographer and later as researcher. I am fluent in Persian and I decided to focus my research on Iran because it is one of the most under-researched Middle Eastern countries by Western photo-historians. I hold a degree in Astrophysics (University of Barcelona), and it is my scientific background that has enabled me to approach the topic from an analytical point of view: in this dissertation I undertake a visual analysis of nineteenth-century Iranian portrait photography.

The camera is not just an a-cultural technical device, a non-culture influenced medium. Culture, or more precisely, the cultural background of the photographer, does play a role in the process of taking a photograph. Photography produces constructions of real life and photographs are cultural productions. Photography is clearly not a mirror of daily life: the fact that images are constructions is especially obvious in nineteenth-century portrait photography. My aim in this dissertation is to analyse photographs in order to show this cultural conditioning in the creation of images. I chose images through the use of fine detail. The corpus of photographs selected for this dissertation constitutes a practical example of photography's construction of the visual world and the goal of this research is to demonstrate that photography is always a construction of reality, regardless the photographer's nationality. I am specifically interested in exploring how indigenous Iranian photographers constructed their own realities in contrast to how foreign photographers constructed Iranian's realities.

Photography and painting both interpret reality. As the British photographer and critic Victor Burgin states, when photography first emerged into the context of nineteenth century aesthetics, it was initially taken to be an automatic record of reality; then it was argued that it was an expression of an individual; then it was considered to be a "record of a reality through a sensibility".¹ Susan Sontag stated, "[P]hotographs are as much interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are".² I myself took the camera and interpreted a reality that was in front of me, no

¹ Burgin 1986, p. 46.

² The art historian Geoffrey Batchen sees the early photographers as a rebuke both to the modernists

matter how honest my intentions to show “reality” were and how deeply I tried to achieve that. I showed with my photographs, like everybody else does, my own reading of the reality that I had in front of me. Significantly, while constructing my own perception of reality, I was missing “reality” itself.

As a result of insights in the cultural components in Iranian photography, we may look with different eyes to Western photography in general, which may be more “Western” than we thought.

The state-of-the-art of the discourse

Both Western and Iranian scholars’ research on nineteenth-century Western photography in Iran has been mainly focused on an historical approach.³ Most of the publications in the West on nineteenth-century photography in Iran deal with the work of Western photographers. Yet, there was much more photography made by Iranian photographers than we know about in the West and definitely more than by Western photography. Such indigenous work is, indeed, interesting and bears a particular and unique aesthetic. There were more than one hundred Iranian photographers active during the second part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century but fewer than thirty Western photographers,⁴ and not all of them were professionals: some were amateurs or just took pictures to illustrate their travels.⁵

Several books have been published about nineteenth-century Iranian indigenous photography as well: compilations of photographs with an introduction about the history of photography in Iran; monographic books of relevant Iranian photographers active during the nineteenth century; books on photography and photographers in different cities and, rarely, on a particular subject, like the one recently published about the photography of children.⁶ Most of these books on indigenous photography were published in Persian and have not been translated into any other language. Therefore, the majority of this material is accessible only to Iranian scholars and to Western scholars fluent in that language.

and post-modernists views of photography. The modernists see photography as an imprint of nature, a tracing of reality, however crafted and shaped. The post-modernists see it as an ever shifting product of culture, a representation that depends, as the British critic John Tagg put it, “on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work”. Batchen in *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* steers a middle course between the two positions. He argues that the early photographers were actually deconstructing (in Jacques Derrida’s terminology) the opposition between nature and culture, reality and representation, showing them to be false.

³ See: Afshar 1992; Barjesteh ed. 2004 and 1999; Bohrer 1999; Damandan 2004; Scarce 1976, pp. 1 22; Stein 1984, pp. 257-292; Tahmasbpour 2007; Zoka 1997.

⁴ For chronology on Western photographers: Vuurman 2004, pp. 24-25.

⁵ Most of the Iranian photographers were active in big cities: 47 in Tehran, 13 in Isfahan, 11 in Tabriz, 9 in Shiraz. For Iranian photographers and biographies: Zoka 1997 (in Persian). Also, Afshar, 1992 (in Persian). For good insights into historical aspects of Iranian photography, see: Adle 1983, pp. 249-281; and Sheikh 2004, pp. 231-253.

⁶ The best sources of information are: Afshar 1992 and Zoka 1997. Further literature: Tahmasbpour 2001 and 2007; Damandan 2001; Jalali 1998, (in Persian); Mahboob & Nemati 2005, (in Persian); Semsar 2004, (in Persian); Sane 1990, (in Persian) and 2004, (in Persian); Torabi 2003 (in Persian); Sattari 2006 (in Persian).

My position in the field

Even if there are studies in the field of indigenous nineteenth-century Iranian photography, there is no in-depth study of the work of Iranian photographers from an analytical approach. As the title of this dissertation suggests, my approach to early Iranian photography is an analytical one based on the visual analysis of photographs taken by Iranian photographers in the nineteenth century. While applying visual analysis, I take into consideration the cultural components of the image.

It is fundamental to remark that the very choice of using the word “Persian” or “Iranian” is often a problematic one, since there is a certain tendency to judge the scholar or writer by means of that choice. I stress here that my choice is totally free of political connotations. I have chosen “Iranian” because it is the word that is in use today to refer to this culture and Iran to refer to the country. There is only one exception: I use *Persian* miniature painting because it is an established reference within traditional painting that is accepted by all art historians working in that field of research.

My research concentrates on a visual analysis of the elements found in nineteenth-century Iranian photography that have been inherited from the Iranian visual arts tradition, especially from the Iranian painting tradition. The research undertakes a comparative study of the Iranian painting tradition and nineteenth-century Iranian portrait photography. The elements that have been identified and analysed are:

- * Mirror-like composition due to the *visual laterality* phenomenon, defined here as the influence of the direction of writing on the composition in works of art, particularly in photography;
- * Use of calligraphic inscriptions of text within the photographic space;
- * Use of traditional Iranian portraiture poses, such as kneeling, in contrast with sitting or standing; and
- * The understanding of space in photographic composition: isometrical perspective, vertical composition, grid structure layout and diffuse compositions.

In contrast to these elements, Western elements have been identified as well, but merely as a way of understanding, by way of contrast, the Iranian elements: Victorian pose (frontal, hieratic, static); studio paraphernalia (chairs, backdrops, balustrades, etc); and iconographical elements mostly borrowed from the Orientalist painting tradition. Finally, I explored the *mixed aesthetics* present in nineteenth-century Iranian photography due to the appropriation of Western elements. I do not maintain that these elements are exclusive for Iranian culture and/or that they are only found in nineteenth-century Iranian photography. In fact, as we shall see in the course of the dissertation, some of these elements are also to be found in Japanese and Indian photography, albeit with their own peculiarities. This indigenous way of representation differs substantially from Western ones, which makes it important to study mainly from a comparative visual analysis approach.

Frames of reference and corpus

In my research I use an interdisciplinary approach that includes the theory of photography, Islamic art history, neuroscience, post-colonial studies and world art studies. I am constructing a theoretical framework to analyse nineteenth-century photographs in their cultural components. Iranian photography is a case study, but the

same study could be undertaken with any other country. The theoretical framework developed here to analyse photographs should work also with other photographic corpuses. Each chapter is guided by a specific theoretical perspective (see further under structure of the thesis). The photographic material will recur and be analysed in the various chapters.

The first step in order to undertake this research was to build up a corpus of photographs from which to draw conclusions after pursuing an in-depth visual analysis.⁷ Five years ago, I started gathering as many published books on Iranian photography as possible with the aim of building up a corpus of photographs that would constitute the material for a starting point for a visual analysis. The process was long and arduous, but I gathered a rich corpus of material to be analyzed.⁸ This corpus consists of around 5.000 portrait photographs (most of them studio portraits, but there are also some outdoor portraits to be found within the corpus). In parallel, I gathered two other corpuses of graphic material: a corpus of paintings (both Persian miniature paintings and Qajar paintings, around 3.000 paintings) and a corpus of Western nineteenth-century portrait photography (around 5.000 photographs). I went time and again through the three corpuses defined above visually analysing them with the aim of establishing groups that could take into consideration each one of the five topics explored on my dissertation: visual laterality, text and photography, pose, space and Western influences.

The Iranian painting tradition includes Persian miniature painting and Qajar painting. A comparison will be established between these three, otherwise diverse mediums: Persian miniature painting, Qajar painting, and portrait photography. Miniatures are part of a sequence in a book. Their size is very small and, therefore, is meant to be enjoyed by only one person at the time, a very intimate contemplation. Interestingly, as stated by Susan Sontag and many other theoreticians, photography is, in contrast to Western painting and film, also an object of contemplation, exactly what miniatures are. In contrast with this, Qajar portraits are life-size paintings and are always exposed to the public mostly on palace walls. Therefore, their reception is collective and open. Photographs can be seen as part of an album and especially in the nineteenth century they were produced with that aim, therefore bearing some narrative meaning, or as individual items. What is especially interesting here is that there is no great difference in size between miniature paintings and photographs (in some cases they

⁷ The photographic corpus selected for this research has been collected from all published books about nineteenth century Iranian photographs, printed all of them in Iran, from the photo-archives in Iran (Palace Golestan, etc), and from Iranian private collectors (some of them have their collections online).

⁸ The photographs printed in the books used while building up the corpus are hosted in several archives in Iran: the biggest and most important one of all photo-archives is the Golestan Palace Library in Tehran, which hosts around 43.000 photographs; the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies; Majlis Library; Tehran University Documentation Centre; National Documentation Centre; National Library; Documentation Centre of the Cultural Heritage Organization, all of them in Tehran; Archives of Mashhad, Isfahan and Tabriz. Several important private collectors should be mentioned here: Dr. Iraj Afshar, Arman Stepanian, Bahman Bayani, Bahman Jalali and Rana Javadi, Mansour Sane (photographs from Shiraz) and Parisa Damandan (photographs from Isfahan). There is also a Museum of Photography which host several thousand photographs and that was founded in 1996 by the photographers and researchers Rana Javadi and Bahman Jalali. Unfortunately, the museum was taken from them by the government and is run now by people that is not as prepared and skilled as its founders. In the West, the most important photo-archives that hosts nineteenth century Iranian photography are Harvard University Library and Free and Sackler Gallery, both in USA.

are even the same size), whereas the difference in size between Western paintings and photographs is huge.⁹

Qajar painting¹⁰ is seen as a worthy successor of the painting of the Timurids (1390-1500) and the Safavids (1501-1722). In portraiture, the Qajar artists surpassed all their predecessors. Whereas Timurid and Safavid painting is confined to manuscripts and albums, Qajar painting presents itself in a variety of forms: painted lacquer, glass, painted enamel and traditional manuscript illustrations and album pictures. As stated by the art historian of Islamic Art, Layla S. Diba, life-size painting of this period was the visual expression of a self-consciously historicizing ruler.¹¹ Naser od-Din Shah approached the new medium of photography in the same way that his predecessors had approached painting: he consciously utilized imagery as a vehicle for the formulation of the Persian self-image. This topic has been considered by the leading Iranian photo historian Reza Sheikh and also by the Iranian theoretician of post-colonialism Ali Behdad.¹² An important part and production of photography in nineteenth-century in Iran was done within the walls of the Golestan Palace in Tehran (Naser od-Din Shah's residence) and the Dar al-Funun.¹³

Structure of the thesis

The dissertation is structured in five chapters, according to the five topics mentioned above.

In chapter one, the main research question is how the direction of writing and reading of Iranian nineteenth-century photographers influenced the way they composed the photographs that they took. No study of the influence of the direction of script on pictorial or photographic composition has ever been undertaken. The research is built on visual analysis and is approached from two disciplines: art history and neuroscience.

After studying the photographic material gathered for this research many times I was able to establish three different groups: linear order (groups of people ordered by height), couples, and people with chairs. The following step was to study the state of the field regarding the *visual laterality* phenomenon in neuropsychology and perception psychology to build a theoretical framework in which this phenomenon could be understood. The hypothesis formed by this research is that if pictures are "read" from left to right (the direction of writing of all Western

⁹ Nevertheless, in recent publications about Western painting-like photographs this is an important issue. Huge formats of photographs by Jeff Wall and the Düsseldorf Schule (Andrea Gursky, Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff, among others) are just but some well-known examples. See: Elkins 2007, pp. 129-203.

¹⁰ It is important to note that when I introduce Qajar portrait paintings and some photographs, the date that is written on a painting or a photographic surface is given in the Iranian calendar, or Solar Hijri. It is currently used in Iran and Afghanistan as the main official calendar. It begins each year on the vernal equinox as precisely determined by astronomical observations from Tehran. The official Iranian calendar was last changed in 1925 by a law of the Iranian Majlis (Parliament) to have fixed month lengths for the first eleven months of the year, with only the final month iterating between 29 and 30 days. The current Iranian calendar year is AP 1387 (AP: Anno Persico/Anno Persarum-Persian year). The Iranian year usually begins on March 21 of the Gregorian calendar. One needs to add 621 or 622 (depending on the time of year) to an Iranian year to find the corresponding year of the Gregorian calendar.

¹¹ Diba 1998, p. 45.

¹² See: Sheikh, 2004, pp. 231-253 and Behdad 2001, pp. 141-152.

¹³ Iran's first institution of higher learning based on Western models. A special department of photography was opened as early as 1851.

languages), the opposite applies for those languages written from right to left (such as Farsi). Therefore Iranian photographers would produce “mirror-images” of those made by Western photographers.

For chapter two, I explored the use and role of calligraphy in Persian painting tradition and the influence that this has had on nineteenth-century Iranian photography. I analyzed the use and meaning of calligraphic inscriptions or text both within pictorial and photographic space. I established three ways of categorizing the photographs: by elaboration of the script; by content and meaning; and by spatial organization. All of these classifications aim to make a difference between script with a decorative purpose and script with a practical/informative purpose (calligraphy versus plain text).

Chapter three is devoted to the topic of pose. I studied whether the use of the traditional kneeling pose in Persian miniature painting and Qajar portraiture has been inherited by nineteenth-century Iranian portrait photography. Further, I have studied the difference of pose and objects held by men and women in painting and later in photography. In order to achieve this, I have made a thorough visual analysis of the pose and objects held by the sitters both in the Iranian painting tradition and in nineteenth-century Iranian photography. I have identified the typical poses used in nineteenth-century portrait photography in Iran that were mainly inherited from the Persian miniature tradition. I also explored the influence of Western poses on Iranian photo studios such as the changing from a kneeling or squatting position to the sitting position due to the introduction of the chair in the photographer’s studio in the same way that happened previously in the painter’s studio.

In chapter four, I researched the understanding of space in the Iranian painting tradition and the influence this has had on nineteenth-century Iranian photography. I analyzed the formal use of space both in Persian miniature painting and photography. The main research issues related to the arrangement of space in Persian miniature painting that I am concerned with in this chapter, are topics such as the non-linear perspective approach or the isometrical perspective (also called the parallel perspective) to project a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional picture plane; the existence of multiple centres of attention (*diffuse* composition); the grid layout structure; and the vertical composition/vertical perspective. I introduced the kinds of compositions that can be defined due to the arrangement of the elements in the pictorial or photographic space, and explored the ones that are peculiar to nineteenth-century Iranian photography as influenced by the Iranian painting tradition.

Chapter five is devoted to the interaction between Western and Iranian photographers. I explored the influence that Western aesthetics in nineteenth-century photography has had on Iranian native portrait photography. The group of indigenous photographers that were more exposed to this foreign influence were the court photographers, in contrast to the bazaar or local photographers. I introduced in this section the Western photographers that were active in Iran in the nineteenth century and focused on the ones whose influence on Iranian photographers was more noticeable. How they influenced the aesthetics of local photographers was an important issue. Especially relevant for the present dissertation was how this influence has changed the four topics explored in the previous chapters: visual laterality, text/calligraphy, pose, and space. In order to discuss this, it was essential to know which Iranian photographers were working together with Western photographers. Depending on the position of the photographer, we can find Iranian photographers whose work perfectly matches that of Western photographers (like court photographers) and others that have a completely Iranian conception and

representation in their work (like bazaar photographers). But the majority of them present, with more or less intensity, a hybrid aesthetic in their work.

My final goal in this dissertation is to show through visual analysis of the images that photographs are cultural products and to transcend Edward Said's orientalism by analysing other constructed realities, those created by indigenous photographers. Next to this, it is fundamental to emphasize the remarkable difference between the Victorian way of representation and other lesser-known peripheral models of representation, such as the Iranian one.¹⁴ I advocate for a place in a global history of photography of those unknown, local photo-histories and of the indigenous photographers that build it up. What I address is historical modes of representation and the need to achieve intercultural approaches in the study of art in general and of photography in particular. World Art Studies, the disciplinary field that is taking into consideration these matters must be, therefore, a source of inspiration and reference for photo historians.¹⁵

¹⁴ Throughout most of photographic history, these local photo histories have been dismissed or slighted. For instance, in Peter Pollack's *Picture History of Photography* (1969); Beaumont Newhall's 1982 revision of *The History of Photography from 1839 to the present day*; In *Masterpieces of Photography*, a 1986 compendium of highlights from the George Eastman House Collection; In Mike Weaver's *Art of Photography, 1839-1989* (1989); Frizot, Michel, *Neue Geschichte der Fotografie*, Könneman, 1989; and Naomi Rosenblum's *A World History of Photography*, there are no references to any of these "peripheral" or "local histories" of photography. Countries like Iran, Syria or Burma have been completely neglected by those global photo-histories and if they have been mentioned at all it has been always through the work of Western photographers in those countries. An exception to this is Mary Warner Marien's book, *Photography. A Cultural History*, London 2002. This book benefits from two decades of new research into non-Western photography.

¹⁵ Fundamental referents for this topic are: Zijlmans and van Damme, 2008; and Onians 2007.