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

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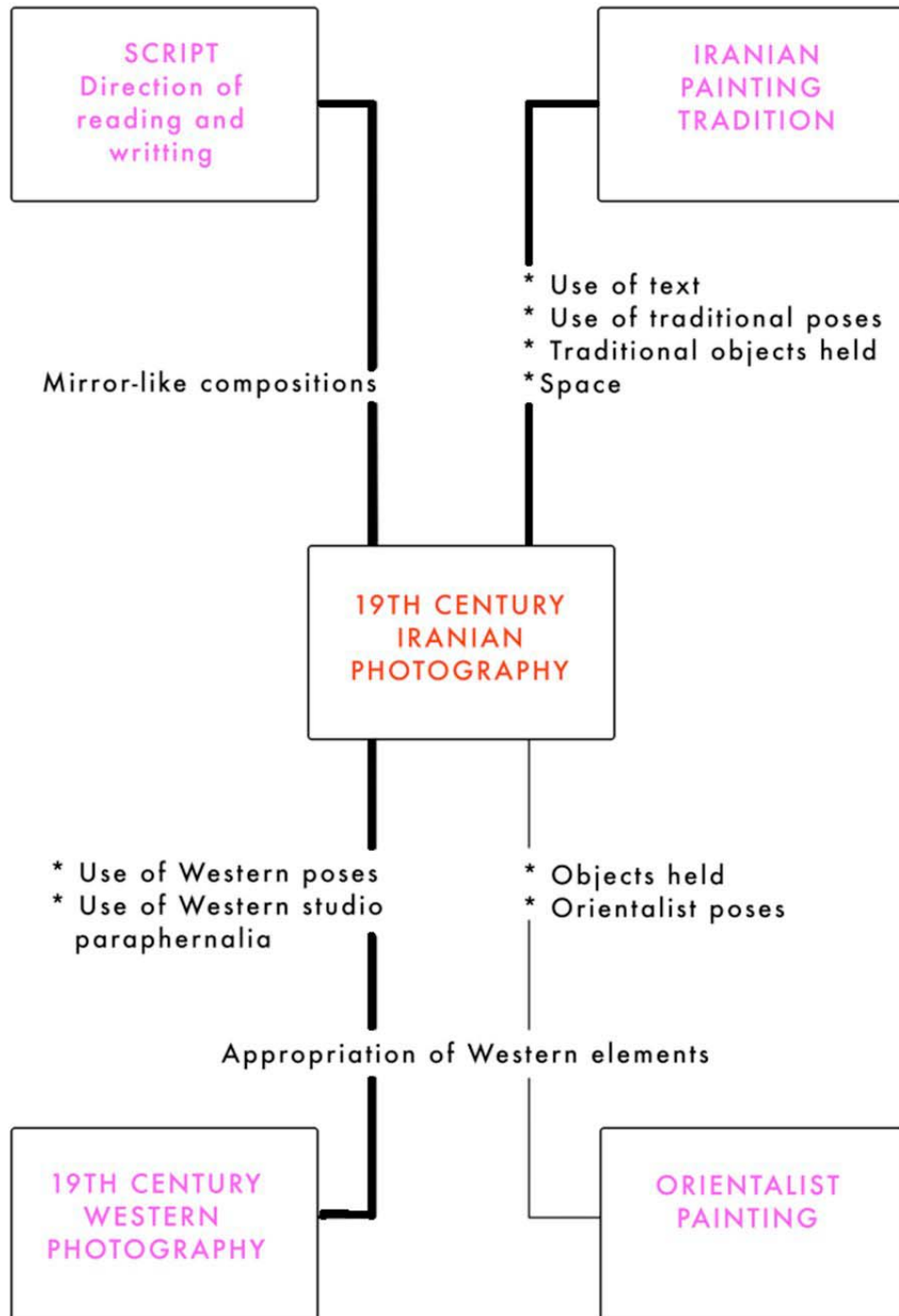
CONCLUSION

Nineteenth-century Western photographers constructed other culture's realities as much as Iranian photographers constructed their own. Both groups of photographers produced their own constructed-realities of the same 'reality' and the result of each process of construction was deeply influenced by the cultural background of the photographer. The Western creations were done in the line with Orientalist photography that was fashionable at that time and practised in other 'exotic' countries such as Algeria or Egypt. The Iranian photographs were influenced both by the Iranian pictorial tradition and by the Western (i.e. Victorian) model. Nevertheless, regardless of their nationality, photographers did not fail to submit to fashion when producing for the tourist market, for which the cultural origins of the photographer were of little importance. These elaborated representations never failed to reflect the ideology of their epoch. Iran was not a commercial country at all as far as its photographic material is concerned; therefore commercial photography has almost no relevance regarding the amount of photographic material produced in Iran in the nineteenth century, and it can be almost reduced exclusively to the work of Antoin Sevruguin.

With this dissertation I have conducted a thorough visual analysis of photographic material and have developed a model to visually analyze and compare corpuses of photographs and paintings. This model aims to unravel images into their cultural components in a multi-layered process in the same way, but in the reversed direction, as the images were constructed: images present different elements on a multi-layered form and these elements can be analyzed one after the other as if we were peeling off an onion. Further, what I mean by "reversed direction" is that I undertook an analysis of those images to define those elements present in the photographs in the contrary direction (temporal and probably also spatial) of the one in which the photographs were taken. The set of cultural components through which I have deconstructed nineteenth-century Iranian photographs is composed of: the direction of the script which leads to a tendency in nineteenth-century Iranian photographers to produce mirror like images of those produced by their Western colleagues; the use of text within the photographic space; the pose of the sitter; and the understanding of the space. This constitutes the particular cultural-components-set of Iranian photography in the nineteenth-century. Mirror-like compositions are directly related to the direction of writing of the script; use of text, pose and space are directly related to the Iranian painting tradition. If we would conduct the same research with a Japanese, Chinese or Indian photographic corpus, we may find a comparable cultural-component-receipt.

The model developed here can be resumed as follows : define the photographic corpus; define the corpus of paintings ; conduct a visual analysis of both corpuses to establish differences and similarities between them; define the cultural components found after visual analysis of the photographic and painting material (these cultural components can include some of the ones already defined for Iranian photography, but the final cultural-set will probably be different; and lastly, establish categories or groups of photographs that represent the cultural components defined in the previous section.

The cultural-components-set found and defined after pursuing an in-depth visual analysis of the corpuses selected for this dissertation and the interaction between the different disciplines, can be resumed in the next diagram:



In each chapter, I have analyzed the photographs from one of the four perspectives defined (visual laterality; use of text; pose; and space). To conclude this book, I would like to come back to a few photographs which have already been introduced from a multi-perspective point of view, to show that the above listed elements are not isolated phenomena but all share space within the photograph.

The portrait of a kneeling mullah (fig. 70) resumes the different aspects of the Persian visual art tradition present in nineteenth-century Iranian photography: the use of inscriptions; the philosophical understanding of images as powerful tools but in compliance with their inherent features (such as with Sufi philosophy); the poetic tone of the text; the use of traditional objects (*tasbi*); the traditional kneeling pose of the sitter; and the use of an ornamental frame. Another photograph that presents several characteristic elements found in Persian miniatures is the portrait of the poet Ga'ani (fig. 67): the use of inscriptions; traditional kneeling pose; objects held (water-pipe); studio paraphernalia (cushion); and an elaborated pass-partout. The third photograph selected here is the group portrait of the poets in Shiraz (fig. 68): the use of inscriptions (poem); traditional kneeling pose in some of the sitters; objects hold (*tasbi*, flowers); and the omnipresent pots of flowers.

Most of the photographs analyzed in this dissertation present at least two of the Persian elements mentioned above, revealing a quite different aesthetic approach to the dominant, Victorian model of photography that was in vogue in the nineteenth century. The research conducted in this dissertation has shown that different aesthetic models of representation existed in the nineteenth century, related to their specific socio-political and cultural context, such as in this case Iran.

It is my intention to undertake further research in the future to apply the aforementioned analytical method to a nineteenth-century Japanese photographic corpus and Ukiyo-e paintings. I am confident that a similar cultural-specific connection between the two ways of representation will be provable.