



Markus Ritter, Staci G. Scheiwiller, eds. *The Indigenous Lens? Early Photography in the Near and Middle East*. Studies in Theory and History of Photography Series. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017. Illustrations. 372 pp. \$80.99, paper, ISBN 978-3-11-049135-7.

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“No artist’s brush such an image could create” has been inscribed on a photograph of a group of poets in Shiraz taken by the photographer Mirza Hasan (1853-1915) in 1894. Iranian poet ‘Abd al-Asi ‘Ali Naqi al-Shirazi composed the poem specifically for the photograph. After declaring “Praise be to the lord for this blessed page,” he refers to the unique nature of photographs as inimitable by the painter’s brush and then begins to praise those depicted (quoted in Carmen Pérez González’s essay in the volume under review, pp. 199-200). Fourteen years earlier, the Ottoman photographer Muhammad Sadiq Bey (1832-1902) also reflected on the medium after he had taken the portrait of Shaykh ‘Umar al-Shaibi, the guardian of the Kaaba: “By means of photography, I depicted the highly esteemed one and sent him [this photograph] with the following verses: ‘My heart captured your presence in the grace and luster of the Kaaba. My heart is burning [with pain] because of the separation, and yet photographers are not condemned to burn in fire [in hell]. You, I have drawn on paper in friendship and memory’” (brackets in the original; quoted in Claude W. Sui’s essay in the volume under review, p. 119).

Markus Ritter and Staci G. Scheiwiller’s edited volume, from which the two examples above are taken, came out of an international guest lecture

series titled “The Geography of Photography” at the Institute of Art History at the University of Zurich. The book is intended to balance and shift the narrative of photo history from a Eurocentric or Western-centric perspective to a more inclusive and global one. It introduces new research on early histories of photography in the Middle East. Many of the essays not only highlight previously unpublished photographic material and new archival research but also give the historical actors themselves a chance to speak by quoting letters, inscriptions, diary entries, and article excerpts. Giving voice to these actors might not seem remarkable for a historical study, yet in a field that for a long time has favored textual and visual accounts of Western visitors in its understanding of Middle Eastern history and culture, this is an important shift.

The book is divided into four sections: “Histories,” “Biographies,” “Practices,” and “Archives.” Many other divisions would have been possible, as there are many connections between the thirteen essays. One theme that comes up often is authorship and acknowledgment. Others, unsurprisingly, are the topics of nationalism and modernity in the Middle East. The issue of translation of both technological treatises on photography and of visual norms and codes also plays an important role and

is linked to the movement and mobility of ideas, concepts, and technologies.

Part 1, “Histories,” consists of two essays. In the first essay, “The Search for an Ottoman Vernacular Photography,” Edhem Eldem urges photo historians to consider previously overlooked sources of Ottoman photography, including work by provincial photographers and by photographers who, though based in Istanbul, did not cater to an elite. He specifically mentions postcards as an undervalued resource: “the combination of image and text allowed for a contextualization of a single item in ways that are unthinkable for a stand-alone photograph” (p. 52). The second essay, a translation by Reza Sheikh of Mohammadreza Tahmasbpour’s “Photography during the Qajar Era, 1842-1925,” provides a short summary of the history of photography in Iran and begins by correcting a widely believed myth: the daguerreotype camera did not arrive in Iran as a diplomatic gift from the British and Russian courts, argues the author, but had been formally requested by Nasir al-Din Shah himself. This statement, which is indeed important as it emphasizes the king’s early interest in this new technology, calls for more information yet sadly little is provided. However, the scholar’s thirst for ample information and interesting primary sources is thoroughly quenched in the second part of the essay, where Tahmasbpour discusses how photography became a valued tool of political propaganda and contributed to the events of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906-11).

The second part, “Biographies,” begins with Elahe Helbig’s essay “Geographies Traced and Histories Told: Photographic Documentation of Land and People by ‘Abdollah Mirza Qajar, 1880s-1890s.” Helbig analyzes the photographic exploration and visual narration of the periphery of the Guarded Domains of Persia (*mamalek-e mahruseh-ye Iran*) as a part of Nasir al-Din’s project of knowledge production. ‘Abdollah Mirza Qajar’s photographs had a direct and indirect political subtext as he

captured political events—for example, in the group portraits of prisoners connected to the rebellion of the Turkoman Yamut tribe in 1889—and depicted contemporary Iran through its peoples, architecture, and landscapes, instead of focusing on Iran’s past in the shape of historical and archaeological monuments. In the following essay, “Early Photography of the Holy Sites of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula,” Claude W. Sui discusses the work and lives of the photographers Muhammad Sadiq Bey and al-Sayyid ‘Abd al-Ghaffar (active in the 1880s), both of whom photographed the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Sadiq Bey used his photographs in his own four publications and displayed them at international exhibitions (Philadelphia 1876 and Venice 1881), whereas ‘Abd al-Ghaffar’s photographs were published without the acknowledgment of his authorship in two books by the Dutch Arabist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje. Yet ‘Abd al-Ghaffar’s glass plates show that he himself had signed the images as *Fotografiyyah al-Sayyid ‘Abd al-Ghaffar, tabib Mecca*. It is unclear why he was not acknowledged by name; on the one hand, it was fairly common practice for Western scholars to reproduce photographs taken by Middle Eastern photographers without naming them, but on the other hand, it also could have been to protect the photographer, and Sui points out that association or even collaboration with Snouck Hurgronje, who had been exiled from Mecca in 1885, could have endangered ‘Abd al-Ghaffar. In the final essay of the second part, Scheiwiller discusses the Iran-based photographer Antoin Sevruguin, or in her words, she relocates him: “Relocating Sevruguin: Contextualizing the Political Climate of the Iranian Photographer Antoin Sevruguin (c. 1851-1933).” Scheiwiller analyzes Sevruguin’s multilayered identity and defines him as a “cultural citizen” of Iran shaped by his upbringing in the country and illustrated by his chosen sobriquet “nurtured by Iran” (*parvardeh-ye Iran*) (p. 148). Through unpublished archival material she sheds new light on lesser-known periods of Sevruguin’s life, discussing the context of the es-

establishment of his first studio in Tabriz and his participation in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. Scheiwiller discovered important new textual sources, while my own work based on unpublished glass plates and albumen prints by Sevruguin held in private collections introduces and analyzes important new visual sources that complement her findings: the artist's little-known photographs of the events of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, which earlier could not be attributed to him. [1]

In the third part, "Practices," art historian Wendy M. K. Shaw's "The Ottoman in Ottoman Photography: Producing Identity through Its Negation" asks what photography can tell us about a collective, proto-national Ottoman identity. She describes Ottoman participation in a global visual culture and states that "what would become Ottoman photography was not a means of showing Ottomans in alterity, which was both constructed by and attractive to European gazes; rather, Ottoman photography emerged in an attempt to represent the empire and its subjects as a self-reflexive representation—not so much of being Ottoman but of (also) being modern" (p. 179). The following essay by photo historian Carmen Pérez González, "Written Images: Poems on Early Iranian Portrait Studio Photography (1864-1930) and Constitutional Revolution Postcards (1905-1911)," delights the reader with selections of Persian poetry inscribed on photographs and picture postcards. The author reproduces the poems both in the original and in translation. She interprets the messages of the postcards, several of which depict postmortem images, as relating to loss, despair, and nostalgia. In the next essay, titled "The Gate of the Bosphorus: Early Photographs of Istanbul and the Dolmabahçe Palace," architectural historian Esra Akcan examines the photographic visualization of the Dolmabahçe Palace (built 1843-56), an icon of the Ottoman Empire's modernization efforts. Photographs of the palace were often prominently placed on one of the first pages of city albums by prominent photographers like Pascal Sébah or the

Abdullah Frères, underlining the building's importance as a symbol of the sultan's power. The depictions of the palace with its neoclassical columns and its state-of-the-art glass ceiling showed how modern "Ottoman palaces were not radically different from their European counterparts, [thereby] falsifying the Orientalist dialectic between 'the West' and 'the East'" (p. 227). The penultimate essay of this section, "The Heroic Lens: Portrait Photography of Ottoman Insurgents in the Nineteenth-Century Balkans—Types and Uses," written by art historian Martina Baleva, discusses the self-fashioning of identity through photography in the Ottoman Balkans. She contextualizes the sartorial choices of the sitters, who in these portraits are in fact more often standing than sitting, and develops a social and political history of the fustanella, a pleated white skirt, which symbolized "male courage and national pride" and was worn by many of the insurgents portrayed (p. 243). On the final pages of this longest section of the book, Stephen Sheehi examines the rise of amateur photography among the Arab middle class and its coexistence alongside professional studios in the essay "Glass Plates and Kodak Cameras: Arab Amateur Photography in the 'Era of Film.'" He regards Arab amateur photography, which celebrated "an *individual* and individuated *subject* [that] rest at the heart of the image," as a part of *al-nahda* photography, which reproduced modernist values while, at times, mourning the ways of a bygone era (p. 272).

The fourth and final part of the book groups three essays under the heading "Archives." Photo historians Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi and Mohammad Sattari's contribution, "The Photography Studio of the Naseri Harem in Nineteenth-Century Iran," tells the history of the Imperial Harem Studio at the Golestan Palace during the era of "photographer king" Nasir al-Din. The studio was managed by Amineh Aqdas (d. 1893), a *sigheh* (temporary wife) of the king, who also featured in a lot of the photographs he took. The essay also addresses how later on the taboo of photographing

women was undermined, yet not abolished, with the beginnings of celebrity culture and the selling of female portraits at the bazaar. The penultimate essay by Alireza Nabipour and Reza Sheikh, “The Photograph Albums of the Royal Golestan Palace: A Window into the Social History of Iran during the Qajar Era,” provides insight into the holdings of the Golestan Palace’s photographic archives by studying a sample of 116 “shadow albums.” These shadow albums are the only resources that are available to researchers in the archive as the originals are not shown anymore. The shadow albums are black-and-white hard-copy print-outs of photographs recently taken by the staff of the Golestan archive of some of the photographs and photographic albums in their archive. A total of 116 albums of a collection of over 1,000 albums in the archive have been made available to researchers in this way. The authors used this sample of album copies to analyze the difference in Nasir al-Din’s and Muzaffar al-Din’s approaches to photography, briefly highlighting the son’s interest in experimental photography, which includes staged comical photographs, then presenting a longer analysis of the photographs taken by and for the father and his engagement with the albums, which included different sets of handwritten annotations. In the last essay, “How a Former Museum of Modern Art Curator Assembled an International History of Photography Collection for Iran in the 1970s,” Donna Stein, who published some of the earliest work on Qajar photography, looks back on her time as an advisor to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. She describes the collection of European and American photographic works, which was acquired on her advice.

The edited volume by Scheiwiller and Ritter features intriguing new research from scholars around the world, accompanied by many well-reproduced photographs. Its insightful essays will undoubtedly enrich many syllabi and inform our understanding of Middle Eastern modern art history. Yet two specific oversights stand out. First, an essay on photography in Armenia or Armenian pho-

tographer networks, sadly missing here, would have enriched and connected the individual essays even more successfully. While the Armenian connection appears regularly in the volume, especially in the two wonderful essays by Scheiwiller and Sui, the subject is never the central focus of an essay, and no Armenian-language sources have been consulted for any of the essays. The lack of such an essay is also emblematic of a larger problem in the field: the artificial disconnect between Middle Eastern and Caucasian photography studies. Second, another important addition would have been an essay investigating transnational printing and photography networks used by Middle Eastern photographers and publishers at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Geneva-based engraving and printing company Sadag, for example, printed the photographic illustrations for the Armenian revolutionary journal *Droshak* (Banner), while also being involved in producing Sadiq Bey’s illustrated publications on Mecca. The reoccurrence of specific European printing companies is clearly not a coincidence and it would be great to learn more about these international exchanges.

In a nutshell, this well-researched edited volume is mandatory reading for everyone interested in the history of photography. Contributions like these will shape the critical study of photography as a global phenomenon, helping curators and educators reframe its history as diffused and diverse, rather than anchored solely in the West.

Note

[1]. See Mira Xenia Schwerda, “How Photography Changed Politics: The Case of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, April 2020).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-amca>

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