Investigating the Development and Spread of Architectural Photography in the Qajar Period

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Abstract

After three years from the invention of photography (1839 AD), this art came to Iran in Mohammad Shah Qajar’s period. Because of Naseredin Shah’s interest in photography, in his period photography found a special position in the court of King. As Shah was interested in recoding newly-built buildings and monuments, architectural photography court became important. At the same time, in the Middle East, great photographers such as Francis Ferith and Maxim Ducomp were busy photographing historical monuments in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. This study examines the reasons for the growth of architectural photography in Iran during the Qajar period.

Keywords: Photography, Architectural Photography, the Qajar period, Buildings.
Introduction

Photography in Iran developed so quickly as Naseredin shah was interested in it. He had a tendency to record the lands under his control and benefitted from photography to do so. “Akasbashi”, a title given to court’s photographer, found a special position in the court of king to take photos of buildings, people, and Shah’s trips. Since the king of Iran was interested in architecture and making new buildings, court’s photographer was delegated to taking photos of historical monuments and newly-built buildings along with detailed reports. On the other hand, Iran in the 19th century was very attractive for tourists and foreigners including merchants, board of deputies, and teachers of Darolfonoon. Some of these figures had photography equipment with them and took photos of historical buildings and architecture of Iran. They, then, gave these photos to the Iranian kings or the kings of their countries as gifts. These photos are collected in albums in Iran and other countries. The most important of these albums is Golestan Palace’s album, which is very useful for researchers in the fields of history, anthropology, architecture, and photography.

Architectural photography in Iran and in the world

Architectural photography is the photographing of buildings and similar structures that are both aesthetically pleasing and accurate representations of their subjects. Architectural photographers are usually skilled in the use of specialized techniques and equipment. Since architectural photography is the photographing of another piece of art, the photographer should be able to use the principles of perspective. In the next step, light, texture, and materials should be paid attention to. Human being has narrow viewing angle. Using special techniques, photographer creates different viewing angles. By placing the camera somewhere lower or higher than viewing line of watchers, photographer shows the building in another way. If the photo is taken from the space, various aspects of the building can be seen at the same time, and thorough understanding of the structure and space can be gained. If the photographer gets close to the building, building details, such as the texture and components of the building can be revealed (McGrath, 2008: 13).

From the advent of photography, architectural photography has been in the service of archaeological studies. From the beginning, archaeologists have been benefitting from photography to discover the sealed secrets of the past for example specific details of each building, the appearance of a vault, or a hieroglyph. Most early photographers took great photos of historical monuments. Although aesthetic, these photos can be used by contemporary archeologists. The most famous photographers who took photos of the Middle East were Maxim Ducomp and Francis Ferith. 125 copies of Ducomb’s photographs were published in the book Egypt, Nubia, Palestine, and Syria in 1852 AD (Vachak, Bagland, and 2008: 49). After three years from the invention of photography (1839), the industry came to Iran and based on the evidences, Jules Richard was the first person who photographed in the court of Mohammad Shah Qajar. In his notes, Richard Jules says: (On October 10 1844, I moved from Tabriz to Tehran. on November 21, I rented a house in Tehran, where a French woman called Madame Abbas lived. She has been living in Iran for almost twenty years and her husband is a merchant from Shiraz. They have been living in Tehran for 4 years and now Madam Abbas is a servant of the court. On December 5 1844, through Madame Abbas, I was allowed to go to the Prince to take his photo on
a silver screen. They brought two sets of photography equipment on metal plates: one a gift from
the Queen of England and the other a gift from the Russian Empire. Although the procedure of
taking photo was described in the attached manuals, no Iranian and non-Iranian has ever managed
to use them to take photos. Since I am able to use the equipment, they summoned me to take the
photo of the prince and his sister. The prince is around 14. He is thin and not very ugly (Saghafi,
1943: 113). Naseredin Shah was interested in photography from his childhood. That is why this
art flourished when he was the king. Mohammad Hassan Khan Etemad Alsaltaneh explains the
date of photography in the third volume of Merat Albaladan: It is one of the new industries
developed in the time of the king……near the end of Mohammadshah Ghazi’s period, Monsieur
Richard, a teacher of Darolfonoon, took photos with a lot of hard work on the silver screen.
Monsieur Phuket is the first person who used Collodion. Monsieur Carlian who had come from
Paris to Tehran to develop photography in Iran photographed Collodion (Afshar, 1992: 17)
Because of his interest in photography, Naseredinshah learned it and constantly encouraged his
servants to learn photography. Inside the court, there were some rooms intended for the
photographs and even in Darolfonoon, a special section was dedicated to photography. Others
who were aware of Shah’s interest in photography took photos and sent him. In her diaries,
Etemad Alsaltaneh writes: “in his leisure time, the King went hunting and riding in the gardens
of the Royal Buildings (Jajrood, Duchamp hill, Sorkhehesar, Shahrestanak, Atabak Park,
Amiriyah, Kamranye, etc.) and he photographed the buildings and the people” (Etemad

The king himself used to take photos. However, he had some photographers in his court who
photographed important figures, new buildings, and historical monuments. Therefore,
“Akasbashi”, a title given to photographer of the court, found a special place and became
important. Akasbashi accompanied the king in his trips to record the places and events. He would
tavel to different places to gather information about old and new buildings and prepare a report.
The best example of this is Abdullah Mirza’s photos. In addition, the teachers of Darolfonnon
such as Monsieur Focty started gaining different technical experience and also military officers
photographed historical monuments in their missions. Rulers, too, photographed the areas under
their control. That’s how photography developed and was not restricted to the court anymore.
However, the development of photography of buildings in Qajar had various reasons which will
be discussed below:

Visual registration of newly-built buildings in the Qajar period

The castle in Tehran was reconstructed in the Qajar period and became the center of economic,
administrative, and political activities. The city developed and was stabilized as the center of
Qajar power. The gates of Tehran which had been built three centuries ago remained intact.
Palaces and office buildings having been built during the Safavid dynasty were completely
renovated in time of the first three Qajar kings. Commercial centers, markets, and inns
developed. After Tehran was selected as the capital, the number of religious buildings, schools,
and mosques dramatically increased as well as the city defenses. However, fundamental changes
in the city occurred in the reign of Naseredin Shah, who ruled for 50 years. As a result of the
increase of population and construction of royal buildings and institutions in his time, the city

largely expanded as political figures and rich people started to build buildings and gardens out of the castle (Zoka 1966:15). Photography was a good means for registering and recording the changes and constructions. Today, we have many photos of the gates of old Tehran, palaces, and royal buildings most of which have completely disappeared (figure number 1).

Figure 1: Tehran customs gate - unknown photographer

In general, architectural photos in the Qajar period include photos of royal palaces, gates, doors to garden buildings, squares, embassies, and schools as well as new buildings constructed by the Qajar kings. In addition, historical monuments were photographed by Iranian and foreign photographers too. In the following, it will be discussed more: Agha Reza Akasbashi, special photographer of Naseredinshah, has taken many photos of buildings in Tehran and other parts of the country. The photos are now kept in Golestan palace. The album number 130 in Golestan Palace dates back to the year 1857 AD and contains the photos related to the king’s trip to Duchamp, Shahrestanak, Emamzadeh, bridge, Farah Abad, Amol, and Bandar Anzali. In fact, he is the first professional photographer in Iran who took photos of everything the king ordered. Yahya zoka writes:

As the king was interested in this science (photography), he decided to send one of his trustworthy servants to learn this noble science. Therefore, Aghareza, the special servant of the king, was chosen for this mission. In the king’s trips to Khorasan, Mazandaran, and Karbala, he took photos of all places and presented them to the king (Zoka, 2005: 47).

In the beginning of some albums in Golestan palace, naseredinshah’s order is mentioned. Abdullah Mirza, a court’s photographer, used to note the king’s orders in his albums. In his album number 208, the order of the king is as follows: "To the request of the king and his financial minister, Amin Alsoltan, I was delegated to take photos of the holy shrine of Abdolazim and the holy shrine of Masoomah and present them to him. 1886 AD”( Album no. 208; Golestan palace).

This collection of photos contains multiple images of the buildings of the shrine of Masoomah from multiple angles. The yard and minarets have been the center of attention of the photographer. The important point is that the angles have been chosen very carefully and
correctly. The people in the yard have been chosen as the scale in these photos. The pictures must have been taken patiently and at a good speed as the people in motion have gradually disappeared. In the same year, he took 84 more photos of Tabriz, Kermanshah, Shiraz monuments, ancient monuments of Persepolis, and Tehran and presented them to the king in album number 207 (Zoka, 2005: 103)

**Full understanding of the king from the areas under his rule**

However, architectural was not used for registering the buildings in Tehran. To capture a fuller understanding of the areas under his control, Naseredinhshah ordered to send him photos of different parts of the country. Some rulers, for example Alikhan, the ruler of Maraghe, prepared the photos of the area under their control and sent to the king. Alikhan was the ruler of Urumiah, Salmas, and Khoy as well. He used to send the king photos of figures and places and send them to the king along with detailed description and visual reports. As a result of his efforts, he managed to receive a line from the king in 1884 (Zoka, 2005:68)(figure2).

![Figure 2: the entrance of telegraph house in Khoy, photographer: Alikhan, the ruler](image)

On 1 November 1887, in his memories, Etemad Alsaltaneh writes:

“I went to the king with some photos of Azerbaijan and the buildings there. Among the photos, there was a photo of Sheikh Shahabedin’s tomb. The king asked who he was and asked me to write his biography” (Etemad Alsaltaneh, 1966: 606).

Abdullah Mirza was among the photographers who used to write detailed notes under his photos, both about the historical aspect of the building and the description of it. Today, his photos are valuable sources of information for researchers. In explanation of Ferdosi’s tomb, he writes:“words cannot describe the greatness of Toos. The building is square with each side being 1248 cm. The height under the dome is 1976cm. it has two roofs but the outer one is ruined. On four sides, there are four arches with four smaller arches above them. Next to the tomb, there is a 3- part building which was supposed to be Asef Aldoulah’s tomb” (figure 3).
The attention of the king to photography of various sites can be fully seen in an order to the ruler of Khorasan to follow and take good care of Abdullah Mirza. This order can be seen in the beginning of album number 240 in 1893 which is in Golestan palace and contains 150 photos: “He should take photos of Kalat, the areas around Kalat such as Line, Archegan, Dehate sorkh, Sarakhs, Sarakhs castle, the villages on the way, and anything interesting. Send your men to protect him everywhere he goes. Follow and support him, personally”.

Figure 3: Ferdosi’s tomb in Toos, Photographer: Abdullah Mirza, 1893

Naseredinshah’s interest in holy places

Because Shah was interested in Imams, shrines and Holy Places in both Iran and neighboring countries would be photographed to be sent to Shah. As an example, album number 171 which was given to Shah’s mother as a gift contains photos of holy sites in Karbala, Kufa, Najaf, and Kadhimiya. The album was prepared before the king's mother traveled to the shrines. The photos were taken by Abbas Ali Baig and published by Agha Reza. In the introduction of the album, it is written: “these are the pictures of Atabat presented to King’s mother. Hope they are accepted” (year 1870). In addition, to Naseredinshah’s request, many photos were taken from the holy shrine of Imam Reza from different angles. These photos provide exact information about the architecture of Mashad during the years 1890-1892AD. In his photographs, he has used new compositions. In album number 208, he has used different angles to show the court and other places of Masoome’s holy shrine. Some photos have been taken from a high angle and some from a low angle. For photographing the dome and the shrine of Hazrat Abdul Azim(PBUH), he went to the roof to be close to the dome. This photo is available in number 50 the album.
Rulers’ interest in visual registration of their lands

It was not only Qajar kings who were interested in photography. Even the rulers and the servants of the court liked photography. The collection of photos in Golestan palace given to the king as gifts by the rulers of various lands proves it. One of these rulers is Abdulhossein Mirza, the ruler of Kerman. The photo he took of Bam castle in 1859AD is kept in museum. In addition, Masood Mirza, nicknamed Zelol Soltan, who is the son of Naseredinshah presented some photos to the king. The photos are taken to introduce the architecture and construction of those days. Among his photos, there are photos of historical monuments of Esfahan which were then ruined, for example, Aeneh Khaneh on the south of the Zayanderood River and Namakdan building made in Safavid time (figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4: Bam castle, Kerman, Photographer: Abdulhossein Mirza, the ruler of Kerman

Figure 5: Aeneh khane, Esfahan, Photographer: Ernest Holster

Naseredinshah’s interest in historical monuments

Naseredinshah was very interested in photography. Apart from his albums, this interest can be seen in his travel books too. In his reign, some old buildings were repaired and restored. Etemed Alsaltaneh writes about the king’s interest in his diary: “The king paid so much attention to historical and ancient structures. In 1857AD, when he travelled to Mazandaran, he ordered JahanNama structure, built in the time of Shahabbas, to be restored. Toghrol tower, near Rey, was also repaired to his order” (Etemad Alsaltaneh, 1966:20).
Photography was a way of registration of the king’s operations. Only ten years after the invention of photography in 1849 AD, Nasereddinshah delegated Richard to photograph Perspolis structures. However, due to some reasons including not being paid the costs of the trip, he returns to Tehran half way and misses the opportunity to record the first photographs of historical sites to his name. A few years later in 21 April 1858 AD, however, Perspolis structures were photographed by the Italian officer, Luigi Peshe. Luigi’s photos are the first dated photos taken from Iranian sites (Tahmasebpour, 2002:61). His photos are collected in album number 335 and kept in Golestan palace. In the introduction, he writes: “this album contains photographs of Takhte Jamshid, the tomb of Soleiman’s mother called Mashad Morghab, Naghshe Rostam, and some other structures. Although the trip to Shiraz was challenging and hard, I made it. May the king like it. I have the honor of being the first person who has photographed Pespolis. I, an Italian military teacher, photographed Perspolis and other structures in Ramadan, 1858AD.” (Figure 6)

In his trips to different parts of the country, Naseredinshah had photographers with him. During a visit to Qom, Kurdistan and Azerbaijan, he took photos of Khorhe, an ancient village with only two columns left. In this trip, they also drilled the columns for excavations. According to Shahriar Adl, this is the beginning of Iranian excavations (Adl, 2000). These photos are stored in album number 679 in the Golestan Palace.

In the reign of Mozafaredinshah, too, photography of such structures was important. Amir Khan Jalil Aldulah, one of the photographers of the court, took many photos in his trips to some Iranian cities like Khoramabad, Dezfool, and Shooshtar and presented them to the king in 1901AD. The photos are with notes and explanations. This album, number 438, is in Golestan Palace now. In photo number 34, Amirkhan describes Dezfool bridge and the importance of it: “Dezfool bridge is a Shapoor structure and is older and stronger than Shooshtar bridge. The bridge is 900 feet long and 20 feet wide. It has 49 bif and small springs. The bridge was partly repaired in Nezam Alsaltane’s time. Last year, the bridge surface and the walls were paved. If it is not repaired, it will find a destiny similar to Shoshtar bridge”

Figure 6: Perspolis; photographer: Luigi, 1858 AD
Westerners’ interest in eastern culture and lands

In the 19th century, travellers and tourists who came to Iran were willing to buy the photos of the most attractive monuments in Iran. Therefore, photographers took photos of historical monuments of Iran and sold them to tourists. An example of these photographers is Soriogin, the Russian photographer, who was living in Iran for many years and photographed between 1880 and 1930. He wanted to study about Iran through photography. He collected a great collection of images of landscapes, monuments, people, and tribes of Iran. He paid special attention to light and the changes of it. Most of his photos are taken at midday, when the shadows are small. Most of the time, he used a person or a group of people in the background of his photos to scale the image. If he couldn’t find a person there, he used something like a camera or tripod in the background to scale the image. An example of this is the photos he has taken of the main gate of Pasargad. Therefore, he must have had more than one camera. He used gentle light and long shadows of the evening to cover part of the walls and make them seem mysterious (Forman, 29)(figure 7). In addition, some foreigners coming to Iran to the king’s invitation photographed cultural attractions of the country and presented their photos to the king or the kings of other countries as gifts.

In 1862AD, an board led by Marselochroty were sent to the court of Naseredinshah by Victoria, Manuel II, the King of Italy. In this board, there were two political members, two military members, and a few geographers’ and historians. They were warmly welcomed by the Iranian court. In the board, there was also an Italian photographer called Luigi Montabone as well as his assistant. The existence of a photographer in Italy's political board represents the awareness of the Italian ambassador of the importance of photos to present a visual travelogue as well as a valuable historical document on relations between Iran and Italy. The photos taken by Montabone and his assistant are among invaluable visual sources of the first years of the reign of NaseredinShah(Tahmasbpour2005: 47).

Scientific explorations

In the time of other Qajar kings too, photography of buildings during scientific exploration has happened. For instance, Heydar Milani took some photos while exploring Shoosh in 1900AD and sent them to Mozafareedinshah. The description to this album, album number 137 kept in Golestan

Figure 7: Tagh Bostan, photographer: Soriogin
The album contains photos of shooshtar historical bridge, the inside and outside of the castle, Kooshk building of dezfool, and Danial building. In addition, the photos taken by French researcher Jean-Jacques De Morgan during his exploration of the ancient geographical regions are currently available in Golestan Palace. In the course of Mozaffari, photography of buildings and ancient monuments was done by photographers and then presented to the king. The collection of photos of Persepolis, Pasargad, Bahram dome in Surmaq, historic buildings of Esfahan, Kashan, and a few inns taken by Hosseini Khanbaba in 1901 AD is an example of this (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Pasargad; photographer: Hosseini Khanbaba

Conclusion

It can be said that architectural photography in Iran in Qajar period has taken place mostly because of the king’s interest in recording architectural structures and historical buildings. Most photos in this period are taken by the photographers of the court. Figures such as Aghareza AKasbashy, Abdullah Mirza Qajar, Mirza Hussein Ali Akasbashy, Joseph Papazian, Ali Khan, Yusuf Khan, Agayanes, and Aamir Khan Jalil al-Dawla are the most important photographers of this period as they have the highest number of architectural photos taken in this period. In addition, some photos were taken by foreigners who were in Iran on a mission. For instance, Luigi, an Italian officer, is the first person who photographed Pasargad in 1858. Most foreigner photographers sent their photos to the king of Iran as gifts.
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