LETTERS REFLECTING ON IRANIAN PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE QAJAR ERA

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Letters reflecting on Iranian photography from the Qajar era

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KASK School of Arts 2018

Details of some of a handful of photographic portraits of Nasser al-din Shah that can be confirmed to be the work of the king himself. The king took these self-portraits between 1865 and 1867. (http://www.mizanproject.org/the-photography-of-the-naseri-harem-part-1/)
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Introduction

My thesis consists of six letters, in which I reflect on the early years of photography in the Qajar era (1794 - 1925) in Iran. The first three letters are written to my best friend, Italian/German photographer Roberta Stein. In my first letter I tell her about how I came into contact with the photography of the Qajar era. The second letter contains research on different aspects of early Iranian photography, starting from photographs that fascinate me personally and raise questions. Most of the letters revolve around the figure of Nasser al-din Shah, the ruler who was intrigued by the new medium and became a photographer himself. I will focus on his self-portraits and the photographs of his wives. In that way I reflect on (self) representation in these early photographs, and what role they played in Iran becoming a modern nation. I will ask questions on who claimed the term modernism and how it was perceived in the late Qajar era. In my third letter to Roberta I will write about the Armenian/Iranian photographer Antoin Sevruguin. He is interesting in the light of questioning an orientalist approach in the early photographs of Iran.

My fourth letter is written to Nazgol Moradi, the main character of my master film. She is a student at the university in Tehran and a very good friend. I am curious to hear from her how she perceives the figure of the king and the early Qajar photographs. I will analyse the influence of the king's interest in the position and representation of women.

In my fifth letter I go deeper into the character of Nasser al-din. I address this letter to Pedram Khosronejad, who has been a very important person for my thesis. Our correspondence will result in a report of our Skype conversation. Pedram will give me insight in the intentions of the king and will oppose him to the practice of Antoin Sevruguin.

I will address my last letter to Nasser al-din Shah himself, in which I will summarise the research I have done and formulate my main conclusions.

An important book for me was Susan Sontag's "On Photography" (1977), which guided me in my philosophical reflections on the birth of photography. "Orientalism" (1978) by Edward Said was the base for my reflections on the orientalist approach in the early photographs by Iranian and non-Iranian photographers. Part of my research has emerged from this book and the influence the notion of orientalism had on photography.

"The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire.... The Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined. On this stage will appear the figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe", writes Said (1978: 202). Orientalism has become "a code by which Europe can interpret both itself and the Orient to itself." (1978: 253)
What I would like to do in my thesis is to establish an approach that is opposed to the orientalist gaze. I don't want to represent or claim information on Iran to try and detain it; instead I presume I don't know anything. I don't create an abstract representation from the other based on an assumed power of knowledge about it, instead my method is to share and go into a dialogue. I exchange my discoveries with a befriended European photographer, an Iranian friend and an important Iranian visual anthropologist. In that way I try to create a direct contact in which different viewpoints assemble and new questions can arise.
I.

Mia cara amica Roberta,

It's been so long since we last saw each other in a cold and dark Berlin. I came to see your photo exhibition and we took the metro to Mitte on an early, foggy morning. In the pale exhibition space I found your loving, intimate photos that ever since that day keep whirling up in my mind. Especially when I'm by the ocean. Your photographs exist now as a world in my mind. I remember the swans in Prague, the bent back in the light of the night, the gloomy eyes of a child. I am eager to see your new work and talk to you.

I have many stories for you about my journey in Iran. On the first day, our host Naghmeh showed us the Tajrish bazaar that was situated just around the corner of her apartment in the north of the city. I remember how I, exhausted from the long journey, swayed through the small streets of the bazaar. Still my mind was clear as I looked around and answered the words of welcome. What struck me was: we might have expected a 'culture shock', an imposed expectation and somewhat (although we didn't want this to happen) influenced by images of the media, but we didn't feel like that at all. My friend and travel companion Manon told me she shared my feeling. We had the curious gaze of travelers when they open the door on their first day in another continent, but we never felt alienated. On the contrary, there were immediately so many things we recognized. I felt home in a world I knew from Iranian films. This experience made me realize the power cinema has on the image we create of a society. Western media mostly show us a one-sided, generalized view on Iran. But cinema shares a world from within, in Iran it is truly a mirror for society. It is poetical and stands close to the concrete daily life. The recognition of these small things we saw in films made us feel connected with the world we entered.

On our last evening in Tehran we got a special gift from a bookseller. The sun had already set when we visited his shop right next to the cinema museum. We were looking for some special notebooks, and when we wanted to pay he held before us a fan of postcards with old black and white photographs. "You can each choose one", he said proudly. Staggering, child-like, we carefully went through them all. They were old, undated postcards, there was only written Qajar era on the back. Doubtful we searched for our favorite, but the book seller laughed and simply said we could take them all, "as a gift!". That night we left for the airport. Silently flying home over Iran, we only had eyes for the old world within the photographs.

The postcards were bundled and published by the Nazar Research and Cultural Institute in Tehran. They came from the archive of the Institute for Iranian Contemporary Historical Studies. "The institute's archive consists of public and private collections, memoirs of prominent individuals in various languages, historical slides, films and official decorations belonging to the Qajar and Pahlavi Dynasties as well as tens of thousands of photographs of Iranian and foreign dignitaries, events and buildings", as written on the website of the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative.¹ The photos date back to the Qajar era in Iran. From 1794 until 1925 the Qajar dynasty

¹ https://meppi.me/institute-for-iranian-contemporary-historical-studies/
ruled the country. At the back side of many photographs is written that they were taken in the palace of Nasser al-din Shah, who ruled from 1848 until 1896. No photographer or exact date is mentioned, I only know they were taken in the second half of the 19th century in the palace of Nasser al-din Shah. The gift of old photographs are the starting point for my research, digging deeper into the first decades of Iranian photography. Because I admire your photographs and vision, I would like to share it with you. I hope my thoughts and discoveries can mean something to you. I will start by telling you how photography came to birth in Iran and under which circumstances.

Last night there was a phenomenal moon eclipse, I could see the shadow of the earth floating over the surface of the moon above the Adriatic coast. Slowly it turned dark red. Could you see this cinematic happening above the vibrant streets of Berlin?

This morning something magical occured. Pedram Khosronejad, a socio-cultural and visual anthropologist of contemporary Iran, had posted old photographs of the moon on his Facebook wall. The photos were taken by Nasser al-din Shah in 1865! In my next letter I will write you about this fascinating ruler who was intrigued by the new medium and became a photographer himself.
Your words on photographing "I am guided by mystery, I have never sought to understand anything and that is where I find my greatest joy" make me think of a thought I read from Susan Sontag: "Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up and thicken the environment we recognise as modern." (1977: 2) Maybe this mystery, that is intrinsic to photography, was also an elusive guide for the Iranian king who photographed the moon. I am curious to discover what were his motives and intentions with the new medium.

With all my heart,

Mira
27.07.2018, Volosko
II.

Cara amica R,

"Photographs are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information."
Susan Sontag, "On Photography" (1977: 59)

It's a warm and lingering morning in the village. The storm is fast forgotten, but the streets still smell like rain, the fingers of the ferns still tremble. The sea is glowing in the distance. The clouds and the water will never look the same again as on this photo.

I was looking for early Iranian photographs of the sea, but until now I didn't find any. I think there was no one yet photographing the sea, or clouds, because it was not functional. The early photographs in Iran "functioned as a political tool for recording information as well as a short-cut to illusionistic painting and portraiture", art historian Layla Diba writes in "Qajar Photography and its Influence on Modern and Contemporary Persian Painting" (an introduction of her lecture in a symposium organized by Pedram Khosronejad at the University of St Andrews in 2011).\[i\]

Photography came to Iran not long after it was introduced in Europe, in the late Qajar era (1785-1925). The first camera was given to the monarch Muhammed Shah, somewhere between 1839 and 1842, by the two colonial powers England and Russia. Cameras, tripods and instructions were given as a gift by diplomatic missions from Queen Victoria and from the Russian Czar Nicholas I.\[ii\] Also cinematography was introduced to a Qajar monarch,

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\[i\] Diba, Layla S. Qajar Photography and its Influence on Modern and Contemporary Persian Painting, in the introduction for the symposium Photography and Cinematography in Qajar Era Iran, 2011

\[ii\] Diba, Layla S. Qajar Photography and its Relationship to Iranian Art: A Reassessment, History
Mozaffar al-Din Shah, around the turn of the century. "Taking this into account, it is clear that the Qajar kings were in great part responsible for the birth of photography and cinematography in Iran, and also that the development of these technologies was influenced by the personal tastes of these monarchs", Pedram Khosronejad writes in the foreword of his book "Untold Stories: The socio-cultural life of images in Qajar Era Iran". (2015: 2)

In the days the very first camera came to Iran, Nasser al-din was the crown prince. I became fascinated by the character of this man who ruled from 1848 until 1896. When Nasser al-din ascended the throne, he appointed the French photographer Francis Carlhian to be his personal teacher. Another important man during the early days of Iranian photography was Jules Richard, a Frenchman who traveled to Iran for unknown reasons. He stayed and was even given an Iranian name, Rishar Khan. Richard taught photography to the young Nasser al-din, a time that would remain dear to the ruler. It was one of the people that stimulated him and aroused his fascination.

"To collect photographs is to collect the world." Susan Sontag, "On Photography" (1977: 2)

The king was so enthusiastic about the new medium that he had two dark rooms installed in his palace. He introduced a photography course in the Dar al-Fonoun school, according to European paradigms and he sent many young talented Iranians to Europe to study photography. Their most important pupil was Nasser al-din Shah himself, who continued to study photography and printing with Carlhian. Nasser al-din collected his photographs carefully in photo albums and wrote special captions for each of them. Western rulers frequently exchanged photo albums, which were given as a gift to royal houses. This inspired Ottoman and Qajar rulers to start doing this as well, creating visual history. Nasser al-din invited European and Iranian photographers to do research in documentary photography and preserved their work. I find it special that the photographs did not merely frame the royal surroundings, but from the beginning also entered the streets of the cities, portraying daily life. Nasser al-din created a royal microcosm, influenced by Persian miniature painting and European portrait photography.

Probably the long visual tradition of the country made it easier for the new
medium to be accepted this quickly. In the second half of the nineteenth century photography was used as a political medium to record information and, as in the West, as an aid to paint portraits. From the end of the Timurid period (ca. 1370-1507) Iranian art was searching for the perfect modern realistic form which they thought they could reach by using the new medium. Layla S. Diba, a scholar of eighteenth and nineteenth century Persian art, writes that before this search, the Iranians aspired to a decorative, stylized and abstract form of Persian painting.  

"The Persian understanding of realism, very different from the European one, was constantly changing, reinvented in the works of the celebrated artists of each generation, such as Bihzad, Reza Abbasi, Mohammad Zaman or Abol Hasan Ghaffari." (Qajar Photography and its Relationship to Iranian Art: A Reassessment, History of Photography, 2013: 4).

Photography had a great impact on the "art of design, the rendering of landscape, in portraiture, in light and shade and in the canon of proportions" Mohammad Hasan Khan Etemad-os-Saltane, one of Nasser al-din Shah's court officials, wrote. The leading court painter of the late nineteenth century Mohammad Ghaffari, better known as Kamal-ol-Molk, used daguerrotypes from Nasser al-din as a crown prince to paint his portrait. Javad Mojabi, an Iranian writer and scholar, has said that Kamal-ol-Molk and the generation of artists he trained, held back the course of modernism in Iran by fifty years. Painters continued to make direct copies of photographs in a style of academic realism, which delayed a modern and renovating development in painting. Only after the Second World War did artists start to search for a new visual language. Although photography responded to their aspirations for the perfect realism, Layla S. Diba writes that "photography was fundamentally not beneficial to the evolution of Persian painting towards an authentic modernity, although it responded clearly to long-held Persian aesthetic values and aspirations towards realism as expressed by Etemad-os-Saltane. The late Qajar period’s pursuit of modernity resulted in the dismantling of the unified creative process of the royal workshops and the insertion of foreign hierarchies in art production and aesthetics. Photographic realism and, by extension, Ghaffari's style of academic realism, actually delayed the onset of an authentic modern visual tradition, which did not emerge until the generation of artists that came on the scene after the Second World War. By then, Iranian art critics and intellectuals were questioning the influence of western cultural forms and systems of knowledge. Iranian artists finally found inspiration in indigenous popular art and calligraphy instead of in imported European art forms: by this synthesis the effects of that nineteenth-century disjunction – of that foreign hierarchy – were

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finally mitigated.\textsuperscript{XII}

The quick acceptance of the new medium mirrored the developments in Europe, but in Iran the principal patron was the court rather than the bourgeoisie. Nasser al-din Shah's grandfather, the second Qajar king Fath'Ali, who ruled from 1797 to 1834, fully understood the power of images and used life-size paintings and reliefs to construct his image. After his son Mohammed Shah encouraged the first experiments with photography in his nation but was less interested in the political potential of images, Nasser al-din used the medium to create and play. He experimented with his image. During his stay in Paris in 1873, Nasser al-din visited the great photographer Nadar, pseudonym for Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, and asked him to take his portrait, as he wrote in his diary.\textsuperscript{XIII}

Nasser al-din Shah photographed by Nadar in 1873

The Iranian photography flourished in the crucial years of the late 19th and early 20th century. In those years the country let go of its traditional coat and became more open to the rest of the world. The king's interest for photography and Europe were interconnected: the modernization of his country and his strengthened diplomatic relationship with the West was reflected in his photographs. He wanted to use the new medium to enter modernity, the scholar Layla S. Diba states in her article "Qajar Photography and its Relationship to Iranian Art: A Reassessment, History of Photography". He, as well as Sultan Abdulhamid I in the Ottoman Empire, used photography to create an image of his nation in the West, and their portrait art was a

\textsuperscript{XII} Diba, Layla S. Qajar Photography and its Relationship to Iranian Art: A Reassessment, History of Photography, 2013, 37:1, 85-98

\textsuperscript{XIII} Diba, Layla S. Qajar Photography and its Relationship to Iranian Art: A Reassessment, History of Photography, 2013, 37:1, 85-98
confirmation of their power.\textsuperscript{XIV} Photography was the ultimate expression of modernity.\textsuperscript{XV} Susan Sontag has written that a society can be called modern when producing and consuming images is one of her main activities. She states that it reproduces and recycles reality, one of the key processes of a modern society. These characteristics give the photographic image an immense power of authority.\textsuperscript{XVI} It is as if a photograph is more real than experienced reality itself. To clarify this, she cites the typical statement that an experience was "like in a movie".\textsuperscript{XVII} In a modern society the image is used as a measuring staff for the real. Sontag writes that a photograph is a mysterious object, one of the most mysterious of modern time.\textsuperscript{XVIII} I think what makes it mysterious is the connection it has with our perception of time. Nasser al-din wanted to enter the modern time with his camera, while photography is the medium that transforms reality into something antique, Sontag writes.\textsuperscript{XIX} Maybe this tension, the friction between an immortal image and a reality that is no longer, fascinated the ruler. Through the eye of Nasser’s camera the present became past,\textsuperscript{XX} and through this act he felt \textit{truely modern} according to scholars as Layla S. Diba.

It is important to pose the question what the term \textit{modern} means and according to which perception. Ali Mirsepassi, author and professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, writes in the introduction of his book "\textit{Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization, Negotiating Modernity in Iran}" that "in order to understand the complex dialectics of modernity in Iran, it is essential to explore the Eurocentric and imperial narrative entrenched deep within its liberatory promises. This chapter, through readings of Montesquieu, Hegel, and Marx, explores how modernity created and preserved a conviction that the non-Western world could exist only as modernity’s other. Although this narrative has recently come under serious challenge by critics such as Edward Said, Timothy Mirchell and Gayatri Spivak, it continues to hold remarkable hegemony in the media, popular culture, and among academics.” (2000: 15)
"What served in place of the photograph; before the camera's invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done with reflection."
John Berger, "About Looking" (1980: 50)

Photography is perceived as both science and magic, evoking a sense of wonder. It is a medium that encourages a tender, drifting, meandering way of seeing. It has become important in the search for happiness of individuals, Susan Sontag writes in "On Photography". (1977: 120) Wouldn't it be lonely to be a king? Glancing at what looks like an early mirror selfie from Nasser al-din and his harem, it appears to me that he saw photography as a form of participation. Sontag writes that "all photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt". (1977: 15)

It is possible that the first Persian photographer was Malek Qasem Mirza, an uncle of the Shah. He produced a daguerrotype self-portrait in Tabriz sometime before 1847. The original disappeared, but a copy of his portrait shows him posing proudly in a chair, head high. I have found a letter addressed to him. It was probably written by his father Fath 'Ali Shah in the early 19th century.

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Self portrait of Malek Sazem Mirza. This self portrait seems to be the only existing photographic witness to the one Persian daguerrotype that survived up to 1979. Copyright Chahryar Adle, Encyclopaedia Iranica (http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/daguerreotype)

In the second half of the nineteenth century European travelers brought pictures from their journeys to Iran - rare images that formed the European view on Iran. On the pictures, taken around 1855, the main subjects are the king, architecture, archeological sites, royal personalities and landscapes.\textsuperscript{xxii} One of the most famous albums is called the Wilkinson Album, from which this picture of Persepolis is taken.

From het Wilkinson Album, both taken between 1840 and 1860 by Luigi Pesce (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/262199)

\textsuperscript{xxii} Brusius, Mirjam. Image problems: Photographic (self-)representations of Persia by Nasser Al-Din Shah and European Travelling Artists in the mid 19th Century (late Qajar Era), in the introduction for the symposium Photography and Cinematography in Qajar Era Iran, 2011

\textsuperscript{xxiii} Sheikh, Reza and González, Carmen Pérez. Editorial: History of Photography, 2013, 37:1, 1-6
Before the arrival of photography and before the first tourists came to Persia, many European artists had traveled to the Ottoman region to paint their oriental dreams. The imposing Zagros mountains made Iran unreachable. The years of political instability, the sudden outbreak of diseases like cholera, the lack of railways (less than 15 km of railway before 1920) and a bad road network made the country difficult to travel through. Travelers going in the direction of Asia could use the new Suez Canal, opened in 1868, but Iran was not on this new route. As a result of this, the Iranian economy could not benefit from this new traffic, avoiding any tourist sector developing. As a consequence there was little room for commercialization of the Iranian photograph market as well. The Shah as well as European travelers contributed to the image of 'the orient', and both had to fulfill certain expectations, art historian Mirjam Brusius writes. Photography enabled Iranians to record and research their nation's history and identity. From the 1850s onwards, travelers used the medium as well to record information and classify that information according to rational systems.

In the Middle East and North Africa postcards of women were produced for European consumption. This production took place in studios of foreign photographers in Algeria, Egypt and Ottoman Turkey. The photographs were replete with Western preconceptions of Eastern women, depicting them mostly half-naked. In Iran the situation was very different. There was no massive production of images, and there was a restriction for women to be photographed by non-members of close family.

What was the attitude of the first European tourists when photographing the Middle East? Was it the urge to expand their knowledge? Did they use oriental photographic methods to find out more about their own identity? At the beginning of the first chapter of Edward Said's "Orientalism", Said quotes Jean-Baptiste Joseph Fourier, who writes about the restless and ambitious character of the Europeans, impatient to utilise the new tools of their power. What is for me so touching and interesting about Said's book, is that he wants to demonstrate the difference between knowledge about others culture that is the result of understanding, compassion and studying and knowledge that is part of a bigger campaign of self-confirmation and combativeness.

Crucial for the first European travelers in the 19th century was their European image of the Orient and the history of that image. Edward Said goes back to Aeschylus' play "The Persians", in which Europe is described as powerful and clearly outlined, while Asia is defeated and is described vaguely. The

xxv Nameghi, K. M. and González, C. P. From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s, History of Photography, 2013, 37:1, 48-73
xxvi cfr. Fourier, Jean-Baptiste Joseph. Préface historique, Description de l'Egypte, Fines Mundi, 1809: 57
xxviii Ibid. 25
xxix Ibid. 89
concept orientalism has to do with this merging of knowing and not knowing, which results in the fact that it answers more to the Western culture than to the supposed subject. XXX The idea of the Orient is always swayed between the Western contempt of the known and their delight - or fear - for what's new. XXXI

The idea that a Western photographer was showing how the others live was assumed to be humanist. In fact he was acting like a hunter with a camera, XXXII photographing compulsively, taking the catch home. Susan Sontag calls it the most friendly way of rapacity. XXXIII The tendency was to take photographs in order to own the places they traveled to, a tendency that is still present today. XXXIV Kodak even placed signposts to the photogenic places of a city ("You shouldn't miss that! Take a picture, go ahead!").

Orientalism is for Edward Said always linked to the establishment of the colonial powers. The development period in the content of orientalism corresponds precisely to the period of European expansion. From 1815 to 1914 the European colonial domination enlarged from 35 percent of the surface of the earth to 85 percent. Since the beginning of the 18th century there were two characteristics of the relationship between East and West. There was an increasing systematic knowledge in Europe on the Orient strengthened by the colonial relations of England and France, which was seen as the relation between a strong and a weak partner. Europe was always in the position of domination, XXXV a position in which power and knowledge intensify each other. The more knowledge western rulers gathered, the better they could rule over the orient. This could have been a motive for the first photographic activities in the Orient. Photographing something can be seen as a way of gathering information. "Knowledge creates the Orient in a way, because it is based upon power", Said states. XXXVI Based on this thought the idea follows that the orient exists because we know it, XXXVII which is a dangerous discourse.

The first European to have photographed Iranian women was probably Francis Carlhian, Nasser al-din's teacher. Other foreign and Iranian male photographers couldn't photograph women, since access to women's quarters was restricted to close family. Carlhian's photographs are in line with European stereotypes of Oriental women: smoking a waterpipe together, leaned back. The German photographer Ernst Holtzer married an Iranian Armenian and lived in the Armenian district of Isfahan around 1870. During three decades he captures the life of ethnic variety of the city, but always according to an Orientalistic survey. In their article "From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s, History of Photography" Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi and Carmen Perez Gonzalez, authors and researchers on Iranian photography, have stated that "Holtzer approached his subjects from a visual documentary perspective,

XXX Ibid. 49
XXXI Ibid. 91
XXXIII Ibid. 55
XXXIV Ibid. 56
XXXVI Ibid. 70
XXXVII Ibid. 60-61
suppressing their individuality in the service of a systematic sociological and anthropological survey. This approach is corroborated by his use of captions stressing the ethnic, working or class background of the sitters. He avoided names and personal details, while providing supplementary information about their ways of life. ³xxxviii

three Armenian women in Isfahan by Ernst Holtzer, second half 19th century (http://www.madarclub.com/fa/print/news/125940)

Holtzer's approach is very different from Nasser al-din's, who was cautious about the use of photographs of his wives. These photographs remained objects for private use, and he always mentioned the names of his wives in the captions. The Shah would even write a memoir of that day next to the name of the model. That's why, according to Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi and Carmen Perez Gonzalez, he defied the premise of oriental or colonial photography, in which women are representative of a class or culture. "In his photographs, individuality replaces class, the characteristic of Oriental photography". ³xxxix

Holtzer tried to classify the Armenian women in Isfahan, to create an objective overview. This revolves around the line of thought that the orient is there for the west to discover, and it is preferably invariable, for centuries and centuries, so we can try to enclose it. Or at least many Western travelers, and photographers, would like to think that the daily life is invariable. When I look at early photographs from European photographers in the 19th century Iran, I have the feeling many of them tried to capture a whole society or a class in one photograph. In my next letter I will write you about this problem of a desired classification, that is characteristic for the orientalist practice of many

³xxxviii Nameghi, Khadijeh Mohammadi and González, Carmen Perez From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s, History of Photography, 2013, 37:1, 51
³xxxix Nameghi, K. M. and González, C. P. From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s, History of Photography, 2013, 37:1, 64
photographers in the late Qajar era.

Warmth,

Mira
10.08.2018, Volosko, Croatia
III.

Cara amica Roberta,

"Because I am the size of what I see
And not the size of my own height!"

I would love to tell you about Antoin Sevruguin, an Armenian-Iranian photographer that is interesting in the light of orientistic photography in Iran. Do you remember the photograph of the veiled woman I showed you last winter?


Antoin Sevruguin lived in Tehran from the late 1830s until 1933. As I wander through his photographs, I am attracted by the magical way he uses light. Antoin studied painting and photography in Tbilisi, where he became inspired by the Russian photographer Dmitri Ivanovich Jermakov. Jermakov had been working on an ambitious collection of images from Russia: he captured the people, the landscape and architecture of Russia. The young Antoin desired to become the greatest Iranian photographer. He persuaded his brothers to accompany him on a journey through Persia. Around 1870, they traveled with a large caravan and took photographs in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Luristan. Maybe it was the first big ambitious journey with as a purpose photographing a nation. They ended their journey in Tehran, where Antoin fell in love and started to shoot portraits. Soon, Nasser al-din Shah noticed the photographer...
and appointed him as one of the official court photographers.\textsuperscript{XL} In the years between 1880 and 1900, the camera left the environment of the palace. Public studios were installed in big cities, and every privileged family started photographing, collecting images as memories. Antoin’s studio in the Ala-amm-Dawla street in Tehran became one of the most respected and well known studios of that time.\textsuperscript{XLI} In between taking studio portraits in Tehran, Antoin continued to travel around Iran to capture his nation. He had several technical assistants who helped him to photograph landscapes, monuments, but also all people he met on the way who visually interested him. I think he must have loved the change from his studio portraits of bourgeois citizens. During his travels he could photograph all kinds of people from different classes of society. Towards the end of the Qajar dynasty, when the restrictions on photographing women were not so strictly enforced, women from aristocratic and wealthy families would go to his studio.\textsuperscript{XLII} Much of Sevruguin’s work was destroyed in the turmoil of the bombardment of Parliament in 1908. His studio was broken into and looted, and although his family survived the unrest and took refuge in the British embassy, only two thousand glass plates out of a collection of more than seven thousand could be retrieved and restored. After the fall of the Qajar dynasty, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled from 1925 until 1941, confiscated Antoin’s surviving glass plates. He thought that the images did not represent a modern, westernized nation, because the photographs of ethnical groups made Iran look too traditional.\textsuperscript{XLIII} Reza Shah’s mission to modernize Iran consisted of “subduing the local tribes, ensuring that the central government held the sole monopoly over the legitimate use of coercion. Conscription ensured that young tribesmen were removed from their locale and scattered across Iran to town garrison far from their kin”, Kamyab Shahriari, a scholar at the Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, University Putra Malaysia, writes.\textsuperscript{XLIV}

His approach can be compared with other Armenian photographers of that time, such as the Abdullah Frères. They were three famous brothers that photographed during the Ottoman empire (ca. 1285 - 1923), but focusing mostly on the upper class, while Sevruguin framed different ethnical groups and classes of society.

When I started reading articles on Sevruguin, I stumbled upon many different interpretations of his approach and intentions. Aphrodite Désirée Navab, an Iranian artist, has written that as a photographer he always felt both uprooted and rooted in Iran, which throws an interesting light on his search for photographs that “depict neither East nor West, but a hybrid culture in between.” She states that Sevruguin took pictures to ask questions, in a time lingering between traditions and modernism. Navab continues that his identity and art became intermingled with the complexity of Iran. With his double

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\item Sheikh, Reza and González, Carmen Pérez. Editorial: \textit{History of Photography}, 2013, 37:1, 1-6
\item Nameghi, K. M. and González, C. P. \textit{From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s}, \textit{History of Photography}, 2013, 37:1, 51
\item https://timeline.com/sevruguin-photos-iran-persia-9befabd8b5a
\end{thebibliography}
Armenian and Iranian identity, Sevruguin had a multicultural perspective, which bridged each and West, Navab states.\textsuperscript{XLV}

Ali Behdad, a professor who has studied and written about Iranian photography, has written that Sevruguin "contributed to what we may call the photographic discourse of Orientalism". Although looking at some of his pictures I presume Sevruguin wanted to surpass the stereotypes, his images nevertheless confirm a western image of the ethnic groups in the east and contributed to the orientalist practice. In his book "Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East" Ali Behdad writes that "akin to pictorial nostalgia is the positivist urge to categorize people, classify their religious and ethnic differences, and document their everyday lives. Many of Sevruguin's images belong to the scènes and types popular among both professional and lay audiences in the late 19th and early 20th century. Motivated by a modernist desire to record the vanishing "primitive" people and societies, and enabled by the emerging discourses of ethnology and evolution, this photographic genre constituted an important part of the colonial project." (2016: 93)

Antoin Sevruguin, Kurdish Jewish Girls, Iran, around 1880 (https://humûs.livejournal.com/4344449.html)

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, European photographers and commercial studios focused on classifying ethnic groups and professions in types. Tea sellers, bankers, dervishes, Jewish people in traditional clothing, courtesans and prostitutes, they were all shot in the studio or in their

environment. All levels of society were presented. Many of Sevruguin's photographs of street types lean against the exotic imagery of the colonial ideology and racial superiority. "Sevruguin's images of ethnic and religious groups and their daily activities embody similar processes of racial othering and classification", Ali Behdad states in "Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East". (2016: 89)

Dear Roberta, I wrote you about Antoin Sevruguin because he was a complex, ambiguous figure in the early Qajar photography. I can tell that he was driven by his fascination for light and shadow and for the texture of his work, and I hope he tried to move beyond taking pictures to share with the Western world how life is in the East. But I am afraid he strived for a classification of the Iranian nation in photographs. I will ask my questions to the visual anthropologist Pedram Khosronejad and share his opinion with you.

Many hugs,

Mira
13.08.2018, Volosko, Croatia

XLVI http://primo.getty.edu/primo_library/libweb/action/dlDisplay.do?vid=GRI&afterPDS=true&institution=01GRI&docId=GETTY_ROSETTAIE2964475
Soobh bekheyr Nazgol delam,  
(Good morning Nazgol, my heart)

I just heard the news about the protests in Iran, how are you? Do you feel the tension growing in Tehran as well? You are in my thoughts, every day since we called last week. It was so good to hear your ever-cheerful voice. I feel strongly connected with you there in the streets that are shivering from heat and disgruntlement. I remembered the unrestrained happiness around Tajrish in March, when we were celebrating Norooz together in your old house. Do you feel home where you live now?

I found this photograph that I took in the night of the Norooz celebrations. It's your old living room where now other families live, but maybe the place remembers us dancing by the window and sharing love stories while your mom was sleeping and the world turned 1397, which I accepted easily because I had entered your world.

I'm always intrigued by photographs without people, in which you feel that the photographer tried to capture a moment, before or after something happened, making that moment infinite. I haven't found any empty houses in Iranian photographs from the Qajar era. If it isn't a archeological site or an overviewing image of a city, there is someone looking into the lens - always posing, aware of the camera, like in a ritual.
I am so happy to hear you've started with analogue photography. Please send me some of your first pictures when the role is finished, I am so excited to see them!

Did you learn in school about the early Iranian photography? How do you see the Qajar king Nasser al-din? An Iranian friend in Belgium told me most Iranians don't like him because he was incompetent and capricious (I read that he had ordered to kill his prime minister Amir Kabir). I continue reading about Nasser al-din, for me he became an inexhaustible source of imagination revolving around the life in his palace. It all starts from the fact that he was obsessed with the new medium photography. His most special and famous photographs are the many he took with his wives. I would like to share some thoughts and questions on the representation of women in these photos with you.

In the early Qajar era images of women were considered taboo. Persian miniature painting and portraiture painting gave no notion of individuality or even female gender. Afshaneh Najmabadi, a researcher in the field of representation of women in Qajar era paintings, (as quoted by Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi & Carmen Pérez González in their article "From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s") writes: "Qajar Iran began with notions of beauty that were largely gender undifferentiated; that is, beautiful men and women were depicted with very similar facial and bodily features. Sometimes the only way one can tell who is male or female is through style of headgear." By the end of the nineteenth century: "We have highly gender differentiated portrayals for beauty. For one thing, depictions of male beauty, and male-male loving couples, completely disappear. Royal portraits of the late- and post-Nasiri period do not have the slim waists and facial features associated with beautiful male bodies of earlier decades. Similarly, female figures become more individualized and distinct in facial and bodily features."

This remarkable change in the representation of women was partly caused by photography. Women entered the domain of visibility, and painters started using photographs as models for realist paintings. It was still hard for artists to enter the world of the women and to simply see and observe them for portraits, but photographs were easier to spread. The camera made the direction of paintings go towards naturalism, away from the idealised painting. The best example of this change can be seen in the work of Kamal-ol-Molk. Afshaneh Najmabadi writes that "Towards the end of the nineteenth century and beginning decades of the twentieth, we do find more representations of real women and fewer of the fantastic. This development is partially related to the movement of women into public spaces, which at once made them 'more representable' and made public representation of fantasy women quite embarrassing."

Last night I saw one of the most beautiful, striking scenes that I ever saw in Iranian cinema, from the film "The Nights of Zayandeh Rood" made in 1990

by Mohsen Makhmalbaf but banned until recently. \textsuperscript{XLVIII} The scene is a monologue, right after the revolution of 1979, of a young Iranian girl in a restaurant. She asks a man who tells her he loves her his entire life but was previously married to someone else, if he ever thought of how it would be to live as a woman. The man is speechless, he seems to think it's a game. She tells him she doesn't want to be a woman in a country where men are more free than women, because "women cannot choose, they are chosen". The man doesn't seem to understand, which makes the woman even a more strong and sad character. I will never forget her strength.

She made me think of an old Qajar photograph that was given to me by the bookseller at the cinema museum, on our last night in Tehran. On the photo you can see five women musicians, posing proudly, majestically. To me they look like they can express themself more freely than the woman in Makhmalbaf's film, almost a century later.

I don’t know who took this picture, it might be a photo from the king’s collection, because for other men it was almost impossible to photograph women. Maybe they were performers for the court. Only in the late Qajar era did female musicians, who, until then, were confined to the women’s world, begin to perform in public. It must have been a magical, interesting subject for photographs. During the Qajar period, music transformed and reshaped itself. The maqâm, the musical art which influenced Asian cultures, had its cradle in Iran and culminated in the middle of the 19th century. The classical music was revised and became a mix of tradition and a new, modern sound where singing became more important. It participated in the revival of poetry.

How strict are the rules for women singing in the streets right now? When I was in Iran, I have never seen a woman sing in public, although I can imagine it happening in the north of Tehran. When Qamar ol-Molouk Vaziri (1905-1959, “the queen of Persian music”, started her career, women were not allowed to sing. She was the first woman of her time to sing in public, in front of men and women, without a veil. She was raised by her grandmother, who was a singer at the darbar (king’s house) of Nasser al-din Shah. The first public appearance of a Persian female vocalist without the hijab was very important for the development of Persian music. It took place in Tehran’s Grand Hotel in 1924. Qamar was also respected for her progressive, political tendencies and her compassion for the poor. She was the first recording artist and the first female vocalist to sing and record highly charged political songs such as Abu’l-Qāsem Āref’s Constitutional Revolution song “Mārš-e jomhuri”. Until the revolution of 1979, female musicians saw her as a great example.

http://www.maisondesculturesdumonde.org/node/675

Another postcard from the gift on our last day was a picture of the harem of Nasser al-din, or at least a part of it. His harem photography show how he used photography to record his private household, his andaroun.¹

Perhaps he also followed these desires in his works of photography. Apart from taking pictures, Nasser al-din made drawings for which the women in his palace were the model. Maybe these revealing pages are one of the reasons it is so difficult to get access to his collection today. His collection along with others are kept in the Golestan palace, a former royal house and now a

museum in Tehran, but very few people, researchers and publishers, have access to them.

The Shah did not only photograph his wives, he also discussed photography with them in letters. Photography had become a part of his personal life and the life of everyone in his palace. In the article "A rare glimpse of 19th-century Iran" in The New York Times Nazila Fathi, an Iranian-Canadian author, has written that "photography was so common at the royal palace that the king's wives and his servants also took pictures and posed playfully in front of the camera. There is a picture of one servant with flowers decorating his head and shoulders. There are also many nude pictures of women, which have been locked in a cabinet since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Many people turned their yards into studios and decorated them with curtains, flowerpots and furniture."

No other artistic medium had transformed women into viewers, models and perhaps even photographers in the way photography did in 19th century Iran. Although photography was primarily done by men and for men, thanks to the Shah there was a great possibility for the harem women to be a model and possibly also to photograph each other. In the second part of his essay "The Photography of the Naseri Harem: Naser al-Din Shah and his Collaborators Outside the Royal Harem", Pedram Khosroneyjad writes that there is still no proof that the harem women were taking photographs themselves. "Perhaps gradually, when the photographic activities of the royal harem became more popular, (...) Naser al-Din Shah ordered the creation of two photography studios inside his royal harem within a one-year interval. Some scholars of the field suggest that after the creation of the royal harem studios, some royal consorts and ladies were also involved in the photographic activities of the king, but again there are no official documents remarking upon such activities. Related documents can prove only the involvement of Amin Aghdas (d. 1894) as the person responsible for managing the royal harem studios, but not her or others' activities in the actual act of photography, or developing and printing the photographs inside the royal harem." A newspaper advertisement of 1877 indicates that women were not allowed in photography studios. The religious prescriptions prevented women from posing for people outside of their close family members. Nasser al-din ignored those religious restrictions and trained his servants and harem eunuchs to do so, according to Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi and Carmen Pérez Gonzalez in their article "From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s". The elite followed the Shah in embracing the new medium, but they were still reluctant to allow their wives to be photographed in public studios. Despite the restrictions, women were eager to
be photographed and to discover the medium.\textsuperscript{LV}

In contrast to the photographs of the men that revolved around power and creating a public political self image, the harem photographs express a more genuine search to representation. It touches me how strong and powerful these women appear. In the article "Liminalities of Gender and Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Iranian Photography: Desirous Bodies" Donna Stein reviews a book by Staci Gem Scheiwiller, author and scholar at the California State University. She writes "Photographs of harem women, who were usually posing for their private inner circles (other harem women or male relatives), exhibited strategies of empowerment, domination, expression, and being seen. As Scheiwiller rightly comments, a legacy of strong-willed authoritative women in Iran existed before the nineteenth century, but the modern period provided different ways for them to express themselves as viable political beings." In "On Photography" (1977: 27) Susan Sontag has written that by simply being photographed, the subject is given importance. It was thus essential for the presentation and perception of women that they they were the favorite subject of Nasser al-din Shah.

In the magazine Al-Raida published by the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, Brynn Hatton, an American scholar, writes a very interesting analysis on the relation between the veil and the political presence of women. "The particular interrelationship between visibility/invisibility and audibility/inaudibility also parallels a much longer history of politicized representations of women in Iran. In addition to the very concrete visibility of the chador and hijab as it has been alternately banned and enforced in public spaces by the state since the 1930s, women’s voices have been associated with popular protest and public demonstrations in Iran since at least the mid-1800s." (Brynn Hatton, 2013: 13) The desired consequence of the forced

\textsuperscript{LV} Read in the memoirs of Jane Dieulafoy, who was the first female foreign traveller who successfully took photographs of Iranian women. Nameghi, K. M. and González, C. P. From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s, History of Photography, 2013: 54
hijab was the protection of women from the male gaze, but it also disrupted the state to distinguish one woman from another in the homogenizing representational system they created. It became a visual tool. "By partially controlling the conditions of their own visual reception in alternately wearing the veil and so asserting their right not to be looked at, or dressing according to secular custom and so asserting their right to be seen, Iranian women have been called “masters of evasion” working with a complex language of exogenous and endogenous expressive tools. The unintended consequence of the high-visibility hijab, which is designed to limit visual access, is that it carves out an alternative space to assert a certain power in invisibility, whereby women paradoxically don the mantle of that which makes them disappear in order to effectively assert the means to representation.” Since the 19th century, "one of the advantages women had was that, when protesting against powerful officials, their veils protected them from individual recognition, so that they could be more intimidating”, Brynn Hatton writes. (2013: 13)

What do you think about this, dear Nazgol?

I am looking forward to reading your answer.
With all my heart,

Mira
15.08.2018, Volosko, Croatia
In a WhatsApp conversation later that day, Nazgol explained some of the things that she wrote in her e-mail. First, she answered my question if she ever heard about the photography activities of Nasser al-din in school. She said that her teachers didn’t talk a lot about it, but she knew that he was one of the only people that could photograph in that period. As a king, he was in a privileged position to experiment with the new medium. After that, she wrote me that Nasser al-din was indeed a very important man for the development of photography in Iran. He also stimulated technical improvements.

I told her that I did not understand the first part of her e-mail about the Persian mythology and asked if she could explain. She answered that women in Persian mythology were represented as devilish, and men were afraid of their power. In their unconsciousness, they knew the main God was a powerful woman. She explains that "according to Carl Gustav Jung mythology is not just a historical story, it's part of the DNA of the people. The meaning of the mythology is not just something from the past, it's in the unconsciousness of the people who live with that every day."

I think that Nazgol wants to tell me that many Iranian men today are still brought up with an unconscious, deeply rooted idea of the representation of women. It is a subject that digresses from my thesis' subject, but I am glad that thanks to my research she has started to share her thoughts about this with me.
Hello mr. Pedram Khosronejad,

Thank you for your reply to my message on Facebook. I am writing my thesis in the form of letters to different people about early Iranian photography and specifically the fascinating character of Nasser al-din Shah. I would like to address a letter to you, reflecting on the identity of the king as a photographer. I have read your wonderful essays on the harem photography of Nasser al-din Shah, which, as you wrote, "should be considered as one of the first contributions to the field of photography of Naser al-Din Shah’s royal harem in which the photographs themselves are used as the main resources and material evidence." I admire that you gained access to these special photographs after many years, and I hope soon you will be able to discover more, since you write "I should confirm here that I think I was able to collect only very few of these images." \(^{LV}\)

I have been trying to imagine what it meant for Nasser al-din to be a ruler and one of the first photographers in Iran. The many self-portraits and other photographs he took may reveal things historically, but at the same time they make my image of his world more complex. Susan Sontag has written that as photos are unable to speak or clarify, they form an endless challenge for the imagination. \(^{LVII}\) I have a few questions, I hope you can find a little time to answer me.

Before the arrival of photography in Iran the king was always portrayed in the same, sublime way: central position, a halo placed behind his head. The intention of the 19th century royal portrait paintings was to confirm an ideal image of the model and to make him more beautiful. In the first decades of photography in Iran this idea lived on. The portrait was seen as an evidence of the existence of the model, that’s why one portrait was mostly enough. Shah Nasser-al din’s passion with photography encouraged him to experiment with his own image and identity. It strikes me that he even portrayed himself when he was ill, which caused a big change in the image of the ruler. \(^{LVIII}\) This was especially astonishing because the early photography was aiming for truth and beauty - idealizing reality. \(^{LIX}\) Did Nasser-al din want to break through this false aspiration? Did he want to show real life in his palace in every aspect - that way creating a kind of story in his photo albums? Did he want to elevate his daily actions (f.e. a barber cutting his moustache, a dentist working on his teeth) to an esthetic act? In Susan Sontag's ‘On Photography’ I read that the first photographers saw their work as a confirmation of life. The photographer was seen as the ideal observer, with as their most important quality a human view on their subject. \(^{LX}\) I find that human view in Nasser al-din’s photographs. I think of him as a creative,


\(^{LVIII}\) Ghasemkhan, Alireza. Iran’s Qajar Cinema and the First Steps towards Decanonization, in the introduction for the symposium Photography and Cinematography in Qajar Era Iran, 2011


enthusiastic person. Dangerous in a way, because he was a king and he had a new tool.

If Nasser al-din was obsessed with documenting and collecting his world and this belonged to his private sphere, I wonder what his viewpoint was on creating the identity of his nation. Art historian Elahe Helbig has written that "photographs became a dominant force in the visual politics of the second half of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, for they contribute to a strong sense of historical continuity, which is required for a nation to find and negotiate its place in the modern world." But how did Nasser al-din Shah perceive modernity, and what was his main intention as a photographer? After hearing and reading so much about Nasser al-din, I see him as someone who was very aware of the special power of photography, and at the same time I see him as a child. I imagine him always curious, a bit naive.

I am looking forward to read your book about the king's harem photography. I have read different opinions about his intentions when photographing his wives. Ali Behdad, an author of "Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East" (2015), wrote that the half-naked harem photographs of the Shah illustrate what he calls a self-orientalising practice, using the same formula as Europeans in photographing his wives as sexual objects. In "The Powerful Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth-century Iran" Ali Behdad writes "this image is an example of what one may call self-orientalising, by which I mean the practice of seeing and representing oneself as Europe's other". (2001: 34) In the article "From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s" the writers Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi and Carmen Pérez Gonzalez defend the Shah against the opinion of Ali Behdad. The writers of the article find him a unique sovereign because his photographs remained objects of private use. "In his photographs, individuality replaces class, the characteristic of Oriental photography." How do you see this?

I read that the collection of 19th century photographs in Iran is particularly extraordinary because at the time Islam was interpreted as banning photographs of people's faces. Iranians were lucky that the king became so fascinated with photography, because the clerics could not oppose him. Mohammed Reza Tahmahsebpour, a photographer and researcher, has said that "Iran is the only country in the Middle East where photography developed in a natural environment, because it was supported by the state". What was Nasser al-din shah's attitude towards this Islamic scepticism about photography? Did he have a blinding desire to enter the modern time with the help of the new medium, did he see photography as the truth (and thus denying the problem), or did he believe in a moderate way? Was there, because of the king's fascination and stimulation, no scepticism about photographing faces?

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I wish to thank you for your inspiring work and for answering my questions.

All the best wishes,
Mira de Boose

17.08.2018, Volosko, Croatia
Skype conversation with Pedram Khosronejad

On the 22nd of August Pedram Khosronejad answered me with a short e-mail asking me where I live and what time it was for me. It was early evening in Ghent, noon in Oklahoma. I had a very inspiring conversation with the visual anthropologist. He talked in a charismatic and humorous way about the figure of Nasser-al din, the king who fascinates us both.

After we greeted each other in three languages ("enchantée", "khoshbakhtam", "nice to meet you") I began by asking him how he perceived the character of the king. I was curious to hear how he would describe him. Mr Khosronejad smiled and told me that I was right in my letter: Nasser al-din Shah was very aware of the magic of photography. He was a very talented and smart man who knew that photography was a sign of Europe. The first time he held a camera in his hands he was only 13 years old. His father, Mohammad Shah Qajar, had been given two daguerrotypes at a time when there were only ten in the world. Nasser al-din was a very creative person. He was always drawing, painting and writing in his diaries. As a child his calligraphy was already wonderful.

I asked Pedram: "was Nasser-al din an artist?", and Pedram answered exuberantly "Oh, yes he was!". His photographs were like unwritten diaries, they tell us so much about him. As I wrote in my letter he photographed himself when he was sick, which shows that he narrated about his life and issues like his health problems. He even made photographic collages, one depicting himself with a goat and his favorite cat.

Photographic collage of Naser al-Din Shah with a hunted mountain goat and his favorite cat, Babri Khan, Golestan Complex, Tehran. Photograph and design by Naser al-Din Shah, 1867.1311

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1311 Figure 8, L. http://www.mizanproject.org/khosronejad-image-gallery/
"Nasser-al din loved naked bodies". Many of his drawings, photographs and diaries are still hidden somewhere, and Pedram hopes one day he will get access to more work. Nasser al-din was mostly interested in photographing his harem, but he took photos of everyone in his palace. He also staged commissioned photographs outside of his palace.

Pedram told me about Nasser's own style of photographing. He had a very authentic way of looking. He was a teaser, Pedram said, pushing his models to do something silly in the photo. This became a kind of signature.

When I asked Pedram if the king's daring photographs were not seen as problematic because of Islamic prescriptions, he told me that Iran had a long tradition of nudity in art. Of course in photography this different, but the king did not intend to share his diary photographs with the world. The photos stayed inside his palace, but he was aware that one day his work would be seen by others. Sometimes, Pedram told me, his photos leaked. Because Nasser al-din did not develop and print his photos himself, his helpers could steal them. That's how few people outside of the palace got access to the king's private images. Some of them who had the financial possibility, started photographing inspired by his work. In his essay "The Photography of the Naseri Harem (Part 2) Naser al-Din Shah and his Collaborators Outside the Royal Harem" mr Khosronejad had written that "one can imagine that whoever had access to the royal studio could print photographs of the royal harem and take them outside the court."

"Did the king intend to use photography as a tool to modernize Iran?", I asked Pedram. "No", he answered me, "he photographed out of curiosity". As a king, it wasn't possible for him to travel the nation he ruled. He used

LXIV Figure 3, L. http://www.mizanproject.org/khosronejad-image-gallery/
photography to discover his nation by commissioning others to go and photograph places. He was both a photographer and a viewer.

Nasser al-din had a very good eye. On his journeys to Paris he saw the work that was made there. He got in contact with European photographers, but he created his own visual language. Pedram told me that the king's work had nothing to do with an orientalist practice. Antoin Sevruguin on the other hand, was not an artist but a businessman, he stated. His intention was to sell exotic images from Iran to Europe. He affected the Iranian self-representation by giving Iranian photographers samples of categorization. Because of his influence some oriental photographers started orientalising themselves.

Pedram Khosronejad ended by saying that he is in the middle of preparing a new exhibition with nude photographs made by Nasser al-din's son. "There is still so much to discover", he said. "Let's stay in touch. Khoda hafez, Mira."
VI.

Your Highness Nasser al-din Shah,

More than hundred twenty years have passed since you ruled over Iran. I’m writing you from a small village in Belgium, it’s the summer of 2018. As a filmmaker, my interest in Iranian culture and language springs from the beautiful, rich Iranian film culture. After your reign, around the end of the 19th century, cinematography was introduced to your nephew Mozaffar al-Din (1853-1907), the next Qajar Shah. I wonder what kind of films you would have made. Do you know there is a film called "Once Upon A Time, Cinema" (1992) which revolves about you? The film by Mohsen Makhmalbaf is a comedy in which the main character, The Cinematographer, goes back into time to show you and your wives many important Iranian films.

Until today many scholars and artists are fascinated by your work as a photographer. When I was in Tehran, I received a package of photographs including some that were made in your court. Intrigued by them, I decided to go deeper into your work. I have written several letters in which I reflect on your intentions as a photographer and pose questions around your practice and influence. In my first letters to my friend and photographer Roberta, I described how the new medium came to birth in Iran. Pedram Khosronejad who is very passionate with your work, writes in the the foreword of his book "Untold Stories: The socio-cultural life of images in Qajar Era Iran" that "it is clear that the Qajar kings were in great part responsible for the birth of photography and cinematography in Iran, and also that the development of these technologies was influenced by the personal tastes of these monarchs". (2015: 2) Next to your stimulation, the long visual tradition of the country made the acceptation of the new medium so fluent. I my second letter to Roberta I have done research on the relation between art and photography. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Iranian art aspired a perfect modern realistic form, which they thought they could reach by using the new medium. But, as Javad Mojabi, an Iranian writer and scholar, writes, the influence of photography delayed a modern and renovating development in painting, because painters continued to make direct copies of photographs in a style of academic realism.

The main question of my thesis was: what was your intention as a photographer? How did you approach the new medium? During my research, I have come across different lines of thinking. In my second letter, I have explained the perception of Basak Kilerci, a scholar and researcher in the field of Iranian photography at the University of Oxford. Kilerci has written that your interest for photography and Europe were connected. Pedram Khosronejad, as he told me in our Skype conversation, agrees with this, but he doesn't follow her in the reasoning that your main intention was to promote the modernization of the country by photographing. According to him, you photographed out of curiosity. Mr Khosronejad sees you as a pioneering artist. Writers Khadijeh Mohammadi Nameghi and Carmen Pérez Gonzalez can relate to this idea, calling you a unique sovereign because your photographs remained objects of private use. Because of that, they write in

their article “From Sitters to Photographers: Women in Photography from the Qajar Era to the 1930s, History of Photography”, you surpass a self-orientalizing practice. "In his photographs, individuality replaces class, the characteristic of Oriental photography." Pedram Khosronejad, who primarily does research on this topic, has written in his essay "The Photography of the Naseri Harem (Part 2) Naser al-Din Shah and his Collaborators Outside the Royal Harem" that "looking at the photographs of Naser al-Din Shah’s royal harem as a whole, I would like to suggest that these images present entirely new information regarding the events, stories, and people of His Majesty’s household, an ensemble that reveals its main patron’s feelings, emotions, love, and desire for those who were waiting on him, those whose very existence depended upon his. This series of photographs does not tell us anything about the conflicts, disputes, and problems that written Qajar diaries (and accordingly scholars of the field) mention; nor do we see any joyful ceremonies, dances, or entertaining moments of the royal harem. The photographs of Naser al-Din Shah’s royal harem are unrelated to Orientalism, ‘self-Orientalism,’ or any school of colonial photography that some scholars of the field try to use to explain them”.

I have devoted my third letter to Antoin Sevruguin, a complex, ambiguous photographer in the Qajar period. I was personally attracted to his images because of its esthetic qualities, but unintentionally I think my first attraction to his work was maybe also exoticizing. In the light of orientalism, his practice is very disputed. Aphrodite Désirée Navab for example, an Iranian artist, defended his work as genuine. She said that he "depicted neither East nor West, but a hybrid culture in between". Although, glancing at his work, I believe Sevruguin longed for an exploration of his own visual language, I came across several analyses that made me realize his practice was focused on the exchange of orientalist images with the West. Pedram Khosronejad called Sevruguin a businessman, opposing him to your practice. Ali Behdad writes that "Sevruguin’s images of ethnic and religious groups and their daily activities embody similar processes of racial othering and classification". ("Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East", 2016: 89) In my second letter to Roberta I have discussed this subject of classification based on Edward Said’s "Orientalism". The discourse of orientalism has had a big impact on the practice of photographers like Antoin Sevruguin. By classifying the ethnical groups in Iran, Sevruguin contributed to the Western notion that there should be knowledge on the Orient gathered, so it can be watched over. The photographs of Sevruguin were seen as important objects of knowledge, which created the image of Iran in the West and even affected the Iranian self-representation by giving them samples to orientalize their own world, Pedram Khosronejad told me.

I addressed my fourth letter to my friend Nazgol in Tehran. In this letter I research how photography transformed women into viewers, models and perhaps also into photographers in the nineteenth century. Thanks to you,

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Nasser al-din, there was a great possibility for harem women to be involved in photography. In the second part of his essay, Pedram Khosronejad writes that "Perhaps gradually, when the photographic activities of the royal harem became more popular, (...) Naser al-Din Shah ordered the creation of two photography studios inside his royal harem within a one-year interval. Some scholars of the field suggest that after the creation of the royal harem studios, some royal consorts and ladies were also involved in the photographic activities of the king, but again there are no official documents remarking upon such activities. Related documents can prove only the involvement of Amineh Aghdas (d. 1894) as the person responsible for managing the royal harem studios, but not her or others’ activities in the actual act of photography, or developing and printing the photographs inside the royal harem." Although there are no official documents remarking upon the actual act of photographing by harem women, by what I know now I can imagine it happened inside the walls of the court.

I ended my letter to Nazgol with quoting an analysis on the relation between the veil and the political presence of women. It is a topic I would like to elaborate on further. Nazgol, a young woman with strong views, has answered with a letter going further on this paragraph, which shows her passionate concern for the rights of women today. I am sure we will continue our conversation on this topic.

Best Nasser-al din, it must be pleasing to hear that so many people around the world are intrigued by your work and share their research with each other in different ways - by writing books and articles, creating a personal archive, or by making films. I hope this exchange can only expand. I am looking forward to discover more of your photographs or diaries. Mr Khosronejad has told me that he is convinced that there are still many things hidden for the outside world in the Golestan Palace and elsewhere.

Yours sincerely,

Mira de Boose
23.08.2018, Zwalm, Belgium
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