Local Portraiture

Pérez González, Carmen

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When Carmen Pérez González asked me to write a foreword to this book, I readily accepted. Carmen had just successfully completed her doctoral dissertation at Leiden University, the Netherlands, and was awarded her PhD on 2 February 2010. What started a good four years ago, when Carmen Pérez knocked on our door presenting her ideas for a dissertation, grew into an important and very interesting PhD thesis which has now resulted in this book containing a comparative visual analysis of nineteenth-century Iranian portrait photography and Persian painting.

How does a Spanish woman with a Masters in Astrophysics from Barcelona University end up studying for a PhD comparing the photography and painting of Iran in Leiden? Her interest in photography was already there but, after two-and-a-half years traveling overland from Turkey to China, she returned home a skilled photographer with over sixty rolls of film. A catalogue for a solo exhibition on the often hard physical labor performed by women in Asia followed, as well as a study in Fine Arts (Photography) at Barcelona University. The choice of Iran was fuelled by her knowledge and love of the country, its language and culture, which she had come to know well through her Iranian husband. Her coming to Leiden was understandable because Leiden University houses an impressive collection of photographs and teaches in this field, as well as being renowned for its expertise in Middle Eastern studies. The decisive factor in her choice of subject matter was, however, the fact that the history of photography in Iran, especially the early period, had been largely overlooked by Western photography historians. Moreover, besides the well-known Western photographers (including Ernst Hoeltzer of Germany) who have worked in Iran since the early days of photography, she also discovered a wealth of Iranian photographers, all with their own idiosyncrasies.

It was precisely the specificity of cultural backgrounds and practices that caught her interest. In order to fully understand the cultural embeddedness of practices used in photography and composition, she undertook a comparative analysis with the rich tradition of Persian painting. Through an in-depth comparative visual analysis of nineteenth-century portrait photography and Persian (miniature) painting Carmen Pérez arrived at, and substantiated, the insight that aesthetic preferences correlate with socio-cultural habits and practices in writing, reading and looking. She also revealed the nature of this relationship. The direction of writing, for instance, proved to be one of the culturally defined elements in a photograph. Whereas in the West pictures are “read” from left to right (the direction of writing of all Western languages), Carmen Pérez’ analysis shows that the opposite in fact
applies in Iran/Persia, where Farsi is written from right to left. Consequently, Iranian photographers produce “mirror images” of those made by Western photographers. This is supported by studies in the field of visual laterality in neuropsychology and perception psychology, which are crucial in building a theoretical framework for exploring this phenomenon. Furthermore, she made discoveries regarding spatial arrangement, poses and attributes, and the use of text within the space of the image, the latter underscoring the importance of poetry, not only in former Persia but in modern Iran too.

The corpus of work grew over the years, and the photographs now number in their thousands. Each time we met, Carmen Pérez proudly showed us yet another stack of photos, albums and books, ardently collected with the aid of numerous friends and colleagues, who purchased books in Iran and elsewhere. The collection is still growing in both size and importance. The numbers reveal the great interest in photography among nineteenth-century Iranian photographers, the quality their skill; but Carmen Pérez’ analysis has also shown how deeply compositional solutions are rooted in the cultural traditions of Persia.

This study is intermedial, intercultural and interdisciplinary. It brings together various mediums (photography, miniature painting, texts), cultures (Western European and Middle Eastern), and theoretical perspectives (visual analysis, neuroscience, art history and history of photography). In this respect it is as important to photographic studies as it is to the field of study we refer to at Leiden University as World Art Studies. This research is a study of indigenous, culture-bound artistic practices, which we are anxious to learn about, and a study of growing interculturalization over the course of time. This process of artistic exchange between disparate contexts involves diffusion or migration of cultural traits back and forth, illustrated in this case by the changing habits in studio portrait photography inspired by Western practices.

To summarize what makes this book important: First, it is a valuable contribution to the study of the history of photography and the field of World Art Studies, as well as to the history and culture of Iran. Secondly, it is built on a large and partly unknown corpus of photographs, and on an interdisciplinary, comparative approach. It convincingly shows the importance of visual analysis, of deep looking. And lastly, it provides a model for comparative analysis of visual material that can be applied to other cultures and contexts. In this respect, the study not only uncovers the cultural conditioning in the creation of images of a particular country, it also elaborates a model for investigating and comparing corpuses of photographs and paintings produced in disparate cultures around the world. This book is an important contribution to the understanding of both cultural particularities and communalities. It is my profound hope that it will prompt a great deal
of discussion on the issue of intercultural exchange and will further open up the field of comparative research within and between cultures.

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