Local Portraiture

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Published by Leiden University Press

Pérez González, Carmen.
Local Portraiture: Through the Lens of the 19th Century Iranian Photographers.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/46346.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/46346
The function of “space” in Persian traditional painting, greatly influenced by Persian mystic culture, may have lent itself to nineteenth-century Iranian photography. I will devote this chapter to explore the understanding of space in Persian painting and the influence that this may have had on nineteenth-century Iranian photography, if at all. I will analyze the formal use of space both in Persian miniature painting and photography. The main research issues related to the arrangement of the space in Persian miniature painting are topics such as the non-linear perspective approach or the isometrical perspective (also called parallel perspective) to project a three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional picture plane; the existence of multiple centers of attention (diffuse composition); the grid layout structure; and the vertical composition/vertical perspective. I will introduce the kinds of compositions that can be defined on the basis of the arrangement of the elements in the pictorial or photographic space, and explore the ones that may be peculiar to nineteenth-century Iranian photography as influenced by the Persian painting tradition.

4.1 Spatial characteristics of Persian miniature painting

Space is perceived, understood, represented and inhabited in different ways in different cultures. This observation follows the same line of thought presented in the previous chapters of my book, and defends that artistic representation and composition is culture conditioned.

As Helen Westgeest states in her book *Zen in the Fifties. Interaction in Art Between East and West*, “Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945) described the traditional Japanese way of suggesting space as follows: ‘The space in art from the Far East is not the space facing the self, but the space in which the self is situated’” (Westgeest 1998: 20). Further, she remarks that “the Japanese artist Hajime Shimoyama confirmed this in an interview with the comment that space for Western artists exists primarily in front of him, whereas for the Japanese artist space surrounds him” (Westgeest 1998: 25). This difference, says Westgeest, would seem to be reflected in the terms observation with respect to Western artists, and participation with respect to Japanese artists.
She remarks also that, in the words of the French scholar of cultural geography Augustin Berque, the opposition between subject and object, between self and non-self, appears only at a certain level, while at another level both terms merge. The surroundings are, in his opinion even more important than the subject, a phenomenon, which he calls contextualism. He contrasts this with the Western approach, which he defines as: “This culture less easily assimilates itself to nature because, fundamentally, the subject’s spontaneous self-definition, or particularity, acts in opposition to the definition, or naturalness, of its environment” (Westgeest 1998: 25).

The analysis that I will present here points to the fact that Iranians also perceive space in a more active way, meaning here, that individuals become part of the whole picture, the whole surrounding space. I will come back to this later while analyzing photographs. The way that Iranian people are presented in nineteenth-century photographs of big groups of people depicted next to buildings is quite peculiar: people invade the whole structure of the building as we shall see later in this chapter, becoming part of the building’s structure.

When looking at paintings and photographs made by artists from different cultures, we realize that there is a different understanding of space, a different treatment of photographic or pictorial space. If we take a representative series of Persian book paintings from a particular school and observe them with analytical attention, then it is straightforward to conclude that they obey certain conventions governing the depiction of space. The art of Persian miniature painting is an interesting historical manifestation of this fact. It is impossible to specify spatial characteristics, which are applicable to all Persian miniature paintings, since there are many different schools with their own peculiarities. However, there are a number of recurring aspects regarding the understanding of the space. To be sure, many of these spatial conventions differ greatly from those followed in Western painting, especially after the Italian Renaissance. In Western works since the Renaissance, a clear composition with one center of attention dominates, whereas in Oriental traditional miniature paintings (Indian, Iranian, Chinese, etc.) we clearly find different centers of attention. That is the first difference that we can notice and that is related to the grid structure of the Oriental miniatures.

The second topic that I will take into consideration is the isometric perspective used in Persian miniature paintings (inherited most probably from the Chinese) in contrast to the Western linear perspective. The latter issue deals with vertical composition and vertical perspective. These spatial elements actually can be grouped in two clusters: the first one being concerned with the fragmentation of the space into units (diffuse composition/grid layout structure) and the second one being concerned with methods of
suggesting perspective. I will devote some time to each one of these three sub-sections.

**Diffuse and scanned compositions/grid layout structure**

The French art historian Lucien Rudrauf has made a systematic study of compositional patterns. This study is sixty years old, but I still find it applicable as far as the definitions are concerned. He distinguishes two families of plastic composition: *diffuse* and *scanned*. However, I do not quite agree with his idea that the scanned composition is more interesting (or developed) from an aesthetic point of view. He calls that type of composition *diffuse* which, without being unrhythmic, does not follow any hierarchical principle in the distribution of its elements. In Rudrauf’s words,

> compositions of this kind are often made of a great number of details, none of which is marked with a predominant accent. The eye is not guided to go from one object to another. Attention scatters itself without hindrance over all parts of the plane, with nothing to lead it imperiously back to the center of radiation. Such pictures can be freely cut up into sections capable of having an independent life. Diffuse compositions ignore, intentionally or not, the effect of lighting which produces accents and contrasts incompatible with its nature. These kinds of compositions are often, if not always, freed from the laws of perspective (of linear perspective, as I emphasize). (Rudrauf 1949: 329)

The Persian miniature, as we shall see later in this chapter, offers typical examples of such diffuse composition. In Occidental art this is an exceptional phenomenon, most often encountered in earlier epochs, before the Italian Renaissance. But it does not disappear in the more evolved stage of spatial realism. The Netherlandish painters Jerome Bosch (1453-1516) and Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569) preferred it. In the words of Rudrauf, “its theoretical interest lies, in part, in the position of its essential characteristics in those of the other large class of plastic compositions: scanned” (Rudrauf 1949: 329). Rudrauf calls that type of composition *scanned*,

> which spreads out before our eyes according to a spatial rhythm which is strongly hierarchical, allowing principal and secondary accents, marked with variable strength but always clearly perceptible. (Rudrauf 1949: 329)

In sum, there are two different kinds of composition, diffuse and scanned, the first being relevant for my study since it is the one that is present in
Persian miniature painting and also, as I shall show with examples, achieved in nineteenth-century Iranian photography. Both mediums display a composition that presents multiple centers of attention.

During an interview with Westgeest, we viewed some Persian miniature paintings and discussed the arrangement of the space in Persian miniatures and its possible influence on nineteenth-century Iranian photographs. She remarked on the resemblance of the formal structure of the miniatures and that of the grid that became popular at the beginning of the twentieth century in European art. The multiple centers of attention characteristic of Persian miniatures are supported or framed by a structure that resembles the grid layout structure, this late concept being a Western contemporary concept. I will briefly introduce this concept to further analyze it in Persian miniatures.

In the early part of the last century there began to appear in France and shortly after in Russia and Holland a structure that has remained emblematic of the modernist ambition within the visual arts ever since. As art critic Rosalind Krauss mentions, with the

surfacing [of] the pre-War cubist painting and [it] subsequently becoming even more stringent and manifest, the grid announces, among other things, modern art’s will to silence its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse (Krauss 1979: 51).

Krauss continues that there are two ways in which the grid functions to declare the modernity of modern art. One is spatial; the other is temporal.

In the spatial sense, the grid states the absolute autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface. In the over-all regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree. Insofar as its order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves; the relationships in the aesthetic field are shown by the grid to be sui generis and, with respect to natural objects, to be both prior and final. The grid declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic. In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity by just being that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere at all, in the art of the last one. In that great set of chain reactions by which modernism was born out of the efforts of the nineteenth century, one final shift resulted in breaking the chain. By “discovering”
the grid, Cubism, De Stijl, Mondrian, Malevich, etc., landed in a place that was out of reach of everything that went before. This is to say, they landed in the present, and everything else was declared to be the past (Krauss 1978: 3).

Krauss goes on to point out that,

one has to travel a long way back into the history of art to find previous examples of grids. One has to go to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to treatises on perspective and to those exquisite studies by Ucello, Leonardo da Vinci or Dürer, where the perspective lattice is inscribed in the depicted world as the armature of its organization. But perspective studies are not really early instances of grids. Perspective was, after all, regarded as the science of the real for a long period of time, not the mode of withdrawal from it. Perspective was the demonstration of the way reality and its representation could be mapped onto one another, the way the painted image and its real-world referent did in fact relate to one another—the first being a form of knowledge about the second. Everything about the grid opposes that relationship, cuts it off from the very beginning. Unlike perspective, the grid does not map the space of a room or a landscape or a group of figures onto the surface of a painting. Indeed, if it maps anything, it maps the surface of the painting itself. (Krauss 1978: 4)

The grid has played a central role in the development and consolidation of the modern movement in twentieth-century graphic design, according to the graphic designer historian Jack H. Williamson. His article “The Grid: History, Use and Meaning”, is an interesting analysis of the evolution of the grid in Western art. The article starts with the late medieval grid followed by the Renaissance and Cartesian grids, then the modern grid and finishes with the post-modern grid. In the words of Williamson,

for practical purposes, the process may be said to begin with Paul Cézanne’s initial move away from Renaissance illusionism toward the abstraction and geometricization of nature and an emphasis on the flat field of the picture plane. This impulse continues through the faceting of the picture plane by synthetic cubism to produce an overall effect, and it peaks when Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) takes up the pictorial grid of synthetic cubism to explore and purify it in virtual isolation from other pictorial elements. Under cubism’s influence, Mondrian’s naturalistic subject matter became progressively abstracted and continued to employ vertical and horizontal bars, sometimes colored and usually not touching, on a white field. Often
these bars appear to continue off the edge of the canvas, suggesting that the field extends infinitely in all directions although the viewer sees only that portion visible within the “window” of the canvas. (Williamson 1986: 22)

This is also the sensation that may be produced in the viewer by many Persian miniatures, like the ones that will be analyzed here, since they all share this sense that the scene goes on in all directions and off the page.

The grid shares, only structurally, the non-linear perspective approach of the Persian miniature painting tradition and its characteristics of non-realistic representation of the real world. There is an interesting corpus of literature on the “grid layout” for Persian miniatures, much of it determined by the text. It is interesting to note that these authors do not use the term “grid” to refer to this phenomenon. The grid structure that underlies every miniature is made more obvious through the way in which architecture has been used to divide space into blocks, as we will see with examples in the next section. The first attempt to make a rigorous study of the grid layout was done in the 1930s by co-authors Emmy Wellesz and Kurt Blauensteiner, in “Illustrationen zur einer Geschichte Timurs”. They arrived at interesting conclusions after analyzing a manuscript of the Zafarnāme dated 953 (1546) and designated as “The Praetorious Codex”. The structural base of composition is best understood in the form of a diagram that was done by these two authors after their study (fig. 114). The Islamic art historian Grace Dunham Guest also did a classical and fundamental study in the 1940s on the use of space and composition in Persian miniatures, “Shiraz Painting in the Sixteenth Century”. She conducted an in-depth analysis of the “inner order” and excellence in composition found in the miniatures of the manuscript volume of the Khamse of Nezāmi held at the Freer and Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington. She explained that this inner order is based on a mathematically-controlled plotting of the page design as a whole. She states that the complete Shiraz canon of proportion, then, which evolved in the third decade of the sixteenth century appears in the diagram illustrated in figure 115. Dunham explains that,

greater liberties were taken with the “canon” towards the end of the [sixteenth] century when the “inner axes” were sometimes abandoned and the upright composition based on divisions of thirds adopted. (figure 116) (Dunham 1949)

Another, more recent, fundamental study of the understanding of space in Persian miniature painting was written in the 1970s by the Iranian archeologist and research director at the CNRS (Paris) Chahryar Adle, “Recherche sur le module et le tracé correcteur dans la miniatur orientale”. In this study he thoroughly analyzes some miniatures and draws a schema of
designs for them, like the modular composition and “traces correcteurs” (fig. 117) of the scene of Shah Abbās attacking the Uzbek army from Fotuhāt-e Hamāyun, from the school of Shiraz. Note the position of the hand of the man right in the center of the image, the vertical divisions of the page in three vertical identical parts regulated by the length of the text. This study illustrates precisely this peculiar understanding of the space in Persian painting.

**Linear perspective versus isometrical projection**

Isometry (like linear perspective) is a graphic method to project three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional picture plane. With an isometrical perspective, the length and width of a cube are placed on the horizontal line of projection with an angle of 30 degrees (see fig. 118).

The three dimensions of a cube are projected onto the picture plane without optical distortion. Height, width and length are true to scale; they are rendered in equal measures. To be more precise, measurements do not change, but optically they distort: there are no 90° corners (squares become rombus). This is different from linear perspective, in which edges that recede from the viewer are drawn shorter to stimulate the optical effect of things looking smaller in the distance. Because things do not get smaller in the distance in isometrical perspective, parallel lines remain parallel. The projection of three-dimensional space onto the two dimensional picture plane is a problem that has roots far back in history. In Europe, the problem was tackled by Renaissance artists such as Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) and Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472). Journalist and expert in Asian technology Jan Krikke notes that traditionally European art was based on optical representation.9 This method of representing linear perspective dominated European art until it was challenged in the twentieth century by the Cubists, who interpreted reality by juxtaposing several viewpoints on a single canvas. The discovery of the vanishing point, which means that the lines of projection meet at an imaginary point on the horizon, resulted in linear perspective: a perspective that is achieved by receding to the vanishing point. Linear perspective tries to achieve visual realism in paintings of three-dimensional environments. But not only in Europe a system to project space on the two-dimensional picture plane was developed. In China, axonometry was developed, which unlike linear perspective is not based on optical principles. In axonometry there is no vanishing point and, therefore, no optical distortion (see fig. 119, an illustration of the difference between axonometry as it is used in Chinese painting [left] and linear perspective).10

In Chinese and Japanese painting, we can find examples of building interiors in which its structural elements, like pillars, will remain parallel as they are in reality and their size and geometry remains constant, even if at
first sight observers may perceive them as divergent. The key features of axonometry are its high vantage point and the parallel lines of projection in the three principal directions: lines that are parallel in the three-dimensional space remain parallel in the two dimensional picture, in contrast to linear perspective in which lines along the z-axis in the three-dimensional space collapse to a single vanishing point at the horizon in the two-dimensional picture. Another characteristic of this kind of perspective is that objects that are distant have the same size as objects that are near; objects do not get smaller as they move away from the viewer. Axonometry was introduced to Europe in the seventeenth century by Jesuits returning from China, Krikke mentions. This scholar continues,

however, the wider acceptance of axonometry had to wait until it was given a mathematical foundation, by William Farish who provided axonometry with its geometrical basis. He formulated isometry, which means “equal measures” because the same scale is used for height, width and depth. (Krikke 1996)

An interesting book by the German art historian Hans Belting, Florenz und Bagdad. Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks, offers a well documented and argumentative study of the Arabic origins of the Western linear perspective in art and constitutes a comparative study of the way of looking in the West and in the Islamic world. He shows differences and similitudes between the way of looking and thinking in both worlds. As Belting states,

Die heutige Globalisierung der Perspektive, die in dem westlichen Patent der weltweiten Medien TV und Presse Unterstützung findet, hat in der Kolonisation anderer Erdteile wie auch in ihrer Missionierung für das Christentum eine erstaunlich lange Vorgeschichte. In diesem gewaltsamen Export wurde die Perspective anderen Kulturen gegen deren eigene Sehgewohnheiten förmlich aufgezwungen. (Belting 2008: 54)

As observed by the art historian Peter Owen,

the same perspective system was used by Byzantine, Islamic, Chinese, Indian, and Persian artists, and can also be seen in early periods of Assyrian and Egyptian art and European Medieval painting. Children and “naïve” or outsider artists also rely on this system to express three-dimensional form. (Owen 1970: 204)

As noted by Westgeest, this system of projection of three-dimensional space onto the two-dimensional picture plane was used in Persian
miniature painting as well. I will come back to this topic when I undertake the visual analysis of those miniatures further below in this chapter.

**Vertical compositions/vertical perspective**

Around the fourteenth century the Shiraz School of miniature painting introduced a new system of vertical perspective, in which figures are shown one over the other, overlapping, and where such things as ponds and carpets appear as flat on the page. In *Humay and Humayan Meeting in the Garden* (fig. 120, see full color section), we can see this way of placing the figures one over the other in this miniature that depicts two lovers who meet at night in a luxurious and enclosed garden. In this kind of vertical perspective, the objects most distant from the spectator are placed at the top; those closest at the bottom. After analyzing Persian miniatures, it seems that there is a tendency to use this kind of vertical perspective from the late fourteenth century onwards.

On the other hand, layering or vertical composition in the arrangement of the sitters in the pictorial space, has been used by several Persian painting schools. A well-known example of this is *The Court of Fath ʿAli Shah*, painted by an unknown artist around 1815 (fig. 121, see full color section). It is an image in miniature scale, which evokes the monumental imperial enthronement scenes. The watercolor is one of a series of reduced copies of life-size wall paintings in the Negarestan palace outside of Tehran, as stated by Diba. She argues further that

the original wall paintings represented an imaginary New Year’s reception at the court of the monarch. The murals were completed in 1812-13 for the reception hall of the palace, by a team of artists led by ʿAbdullah Khān. The copies (undated and unsigned, and executed in opaque watercolor, oil, and engraving) were produced sometime between the completion of the mural in 1812-13 and 1834, the year of Fath ʿAli Shah’s death. (Diba 1998: 174)

The central image depicts Fath ʿAli Shah enthroned with twelve of his sons. Fath ʿAli Shah sits on an impressive jeweled throne with a sword on his lap and a water pipe in his hand. As Diba explains, his sons are all depicted standing (a symbol of respect) with their arms crossed. In the lower section ambassadors from France, Great Britain, Russia, the Ottoman Empire and the kingdoms of Sind and Arabia are depicted in meticulous detail.
4.2 The use of space in Persian miniature painting

Having defined the different types of spatial composition, I will analyze a selected group of Persian miniatures that show all or some of the three spatial elements that I have just introduced and defined above.

One of the miniatures in which we can more clearly notice the isometrical perspective used to suggest the three-dimensional space, is *Nighttime in a Palace* (fig. 122, see full color section). We can notice that all lines remain parallel in the three dimensions of the space, not receding to a vanishing point, and all the figures depicted in this painting have the same size. The vertical composition here only seems to reinforce the suggestion of a three-dimensional space by isometrical perspective. In this dense image of urban life in sixteenth-century Iran, all kinds of people from different social and economic classes and ages are depicted, all engaged in different activities. In the bottom left corner of the painting, there is a group of male musicians playing different instruments. Right above them, a prince hosts a reception for noblemen on a tiled blue terrace. Notice the three servants bringing fruits and cones of sugar. There is also a group of women sitting on a balcony in the upper left part of the image and observing what is happening on the terrace while listening to the music being played by the musicians. Candles, oil lamps and other lighting sources are spread all over the space in the private houses, the markets (see an active market scene right in the center of the painting) and the mosque (see the right top corner). This is a fascinating painting where many different events are happening simultaneously in multiple centers of attention and with a narrative that gives the image a temporal and spatial dimension at the same time. The grid layout structure is also evident. The apparent lack of compositional organization in this picture is remarkable. Instead it appears to be a series of urban and genre-like architectural boxes comfortably fitted together.

Here it is important to note that the majority of the Persian miniatures that I have seen during this research are vertical. In this particular painting, it is especially clear that there is a combination of two spatial strategies to give the painting an alternative way of suggesting perspective: isometrical and vertical perspective. In the vertical perspective, the objects most distant from the viewer are placed at the top, whereas the objects closest to the viewer are placed at the bottom. This combination of isometrical and vertical perspectives is typical of Persian miniature painting and I have not found it, for instance, in Japanese or Chinese painting. Actually, it is relevant in order to understand the difference in the use of isometrical perspective in these countries that the origin of axonometry in China was found in the Chinese scroll paintings. A typical scroll painting has a size of approximately 40 cms high by several meters wide. Thiadmer Riemersma explains that,
for these scroll paintings, the Chinese painters needed a perspective that had no explicit vanishing points; every scene of the scroll painting would be seen individually, and a vanishing point that lies outside the viewpoint creates a disoriented view of the scene. The Chinese painters solved the problem by drawing lines along the z-axis as parallel lines in the scroll painting. This has the effect of placing the horizon at an imaginary line high above the painting. The axonometric projection is a technical term for a group of perspectives to which Chinese parallel perspective also belongs.
(Riemersma 2001: 3)

This is an important difference between the arrangement of the space and use of isometrical perspective used in China and Japan (horizontal format) and introduced here in contrast to Iran (vertical format). Notice that Japan also has *kakemono* (hanging vertical scroll) as opposed to *makimono* which is meant to be unrolled laterally on a flat surface. The *kakemono* is intended to be hung against a wall as part of the interior decoration and lacks, due to its format, the isometric perspective approach that was shown in the horizontal scrolls. Interestingly, what both pictorial traditions share and what makes them different from a Western spatial approach in painting, is that in Oriental painting the eyes scan parallel to the surface instead of looking from foreground to background as in the Western approach.

*Wedding Celebration of Prince Homāy and Princess Homāyun* (fig. 123, see full color section) painted by Joneyd Naqqāsh Sultāni in 1396, is another example where we find several of the spatial elements introduced above. It is an important work, since it plays an important role on the topic of signatures and paintings treated in chapter 2. As noted by Blair,

the window-grille above the princess’ s head (the one sitting on her bed at the left side of the image), bears the signature of Junayad, “the royal painter”, the first unquestionably genuine signature in Persian manuscript painting. (Blair & Bloom 1994: 33)

Here the vertical perspective used to suggest three-dimensional space is again evident: the way in which the figures have been arranged to give the impression that the ones placed at the bottom are closest to the observer, whereas the ones placed at the top are most distant. In this case, the princess is the one that seems to be furthest from our view, inside of her room and sitting on her bed. In the words of Grabar, “a fascinating composition with dominant red colors in which all the episodes of a wedding, from sexual consummation to dancing, are either depicted or symbolized” (Grabar 2000: 55). Blair tells us that,
the depiction of architecture is particularly elaborate, with geometric tile dadoes, floral arabesque archways, compartment carpets, and carved plaster grilles displayed in a dazzling array of brilliant blues, oranges and reds. This world of eternal lyricism in which flowers bloom and birds sing forever is one of the most characteristic features of Persian manuscript painting of the following century. (Blair 1994: 33)

The most interesting study for my own research that I have found on the understanding and use of space in Persian miniature painting is “The Use of Space in Timurid Painting” by the Islamic art historian Robert Hillenbrand. He focuses his study on four specific areas where the spatial understanding of space in Persian miniature painting is at its most intense: architecture, the preference for solid blocks of color or form, the margin and the use of empty space. I will just refer to the first two aspects, since they are the ones relevant for my own analysis of nineteenth-century Iranian photographs. In his words, “most strikingly of all, Timurid painting learned to suggest an architectural framework rather than to display it” (Hillenbrand 1992: 77). This idea can be clearly appreciated in the next miniature, the Shāh-nāme (The Book of the Kings) scene Ardashir and his slave-girl Gölânâr, which he analyzed. He points out, “it is the difference in plane within the architecture which helps structure the picture and above all integrate it with the text”. The vertical divisions of the architecture reinforce those of the text columns, and the blocks of color operate in harmony with that aim. In this case, it is important to note that it is the choice of architectural division that has placed considerable emphasis on the sleeping personages. This element is also found at times in nineteenth-century Iranian photographs, text framing or surrounding the photograph. Another example of this kind of architectural arrangement is to be found in the Nezâmi’s British Library Khamse scene Hârûn al-Rashid in a Bathouse (fig. 124, see full color section). This miniature constitutes a good example of what a public bath at that time was like, where even the caliph leaves his own crown in a cupboard in the room where the men get undressed. This miniature is interesting as well because it shows a different organization of the space, as remarked by Grabar: “simple brick walls have replaced richly colorful decorated ones, and all the bathhouse employees are shown in their work clothes” (Grabar 2000: 115).

In the classic study by D. H. Zain, Formal Values in Timurid painting, the author includes numerous schema of design that clearly show the grid layout and block schema that I am concerned with regarding Persian miniatures. Zain’s work was brought to my attention reading Hillenbrand’s article on the uses of space in Timurid painting. Three of the figures shown in Zain’s study are design schemas of miniatures that I have selected for this chapter. One of them (fig. 125) is the schema of design of the
miniature that I have presented. We can also appreciate here the isometric perspective that is clearly recognizable by the parallel lines in the z-axis that do not recede towards a vanishing point.

The most used contemporary fashion for composing an image on several levels is often reflected on the architectural forms themselves and those forms would allow many stories to happen at the same time, implying depth both in form and meaning. As Hillenbrand stated, “a more dramatic version of the same idea is found in the sharp zigzag movement of successive flights of stairs that are sometimes used in miniatures” (Hillenbrand 1992: 78). This is especially clear in *The Seduction of Yusuf*, the celebrated scene of Yusuf pursued by Zoleykā in the Cairo Saadi’s16 Bustān of 893, painted in 1488 as it is written on the cartouche to the left of the iwan, and that is a painting which implies the passage of time as well as a sequence of spaces (fig. 126, see full color section). This miniature is signed by the great master Behzād on the architectural panel over the window in the room on the upper left. In this case, as Hillenbrand explains further,

> the explosive impact of the encounter between the two major protagonists owes much of its intensity to the earlier temporal and spatial building-up. The artist has responded to the accumulated suspense and eventual dramatic climax of the literary text with an extraordinarily apt visual equivalent whereby the principals of each tale confront each other at the very top of the picture—pictorially speaking at the very last moment. Thus time is suggested by space. (Hillenbrand 1992: 78)

He concludes this part of the story with the description of an architectural construct that is rich and laden with mystical overtones.

In Behzad’s painting, the architectural forms are extremely rich, but they are also empty. As noted by Sims, “In the midst of this patterned elaboration, color and the absence of pattern draw the eye to the two figures and their relationship” (Sims 2002: 328). Notice here, once more, the perfectly-designed page with the columns, where the text has been written, being the ones that decide the final composition of the painting with a grid layout. As stated by the Islamic art historian and curator Lisa Golembek,

> the correspondence of text and painting in detail and in emphasis are static levels of relationship. There is yet in Behzad’s painting a dynamic level in which the formal composition actively conveys meaning (Golembek 1972: 28).

The grid layout is perfectly noticeable in Zain’s schema (fig. 127). Note as well the isometric perspective approach to suggest three-dimensional space. For instance, the balcony in the right top corner of the miniature shows
clearly the parallel lines in each space direction and the same holds true for any other part of the structure of the building. The vertical composition is also shown here, like in all other miniatures selected for this section. Persian painters tended to use solid blocks of form and color to create their miniatures. Often these blocks are created by the structure of the building where the scene is taking place, in other occasions blocks may be created by rectilinear or multifold ponds, doors, balconies, floors, etc. In the words of Hillenbrand,

it is a prerequisite of their compositional role that they should be as monochrome as is consistent with their nature. Thus they establish a presence in the picture, something that is much more than mere decorative infill or background. They have an obvious spatial significance. (Hillenbrand 1992: 84)

In *Funeral Procession*, from *Mantiq al-teyr* (“The Conference of the Birds”) by Farid al-Din Attār, 1483 (fig. 128, see full color section), the ground is shown in several receding planes. The landscape, in fact, constitutes a true background to the depicted subjects. The tree that strays outside the frame-like margins is an element that was adopted by Persian miniaturists as an influence from the Chinese painting tradition. Contrary to what Rudrauf stated regarding *diffuse* composition, that the eye is not guided to go from one object to another (read before in this chapter), Grabar states in *Mostly Miniatures*, that,

if we go a little further in the analysis, we discover the curious fact that despite the apparently artificial compositions of the human figures, two details are rendered somewhat less unreal. One is the important clue of the gaze. All the miniatures of a certain quality are organized by a circuit of gazes that the protagonists launch at each other. It is a complex and passionate game of clues that, as in embroidery, organizes the relationships among the persons. (Grabar 2000: 133)

We can see this in this miniature, in which a complex composition is shown, and as he explains further,

heads and eyes compel a dynamic movement leading up to the snake in the tree, which is about to gobble up the eggs in the nest. The other trait are the witnesses, a whole world of figures who are there as if to bear witness to the truth of what is depicted; they are furnished with a formulary of gestures whose details it would be interesting to unravel. These two traits are familiar in Italian painting of the same centuries, but they have been miniaturized in Persian
painting and demand a greater effort from the observer, just as the painter was obliged to work with a precision that did not allow for error. (Grabar 2000: 133-36)

This painting is a good example to see the funerary practices in the fifteenth century. As explained by Sims, a funeral procession arrives at the gate of the cemetery; inside workmen are preparing the grave of the man whose coffin is preceded by his mourning son, clothes torn from his upper body. He is placed in the vertical center of the picture, on the direct axis supplied by one corner of the platform where his father’s grave is being dug. The secondary axis of the picture is the horizontal line of the cemetery wall, effectively dividing the two parts of the picture. Notice that, even if this miniature is mostly non-architectural, the isometric perspective is working: the octagonal fence that is depicted at the top left corner is shown with parallel lines in the three directions of space. Once again, Zain’s schema shows the grid layout structure and we can see the parallel lines that I have just talked about in the octagonal fence (fig. 129).

Some experts in the field of Persian painting have tried to explain the fact that the Persian miniature painters did not use linear perspective to suggest a three-dimensional space. For instance, the art historian Sheila Canby says of Persian painting,

by favoring two-dimensionality and compositional harmony, they presented things as they should be, not necessarily as they are. Within these parameters, Persian artists produced paintings over six centuries unrivalled in their perfect realization of an ideal world. (Canby 1993: 7)

She goes on to say that,

No matter what its period, a great Persian painting will exhibit a distinct sense of design and an understanding of how to arrange colors and forms on a flat surface to form a rhythmic whole. Despite the influence of European art from the seventeenth century onwards, Persian painters do not appear to have been convinced of the desirability of the illusionism that transforms two dimensions into the suggestion of three. Perhaps such visual tricks seemed innately dishonest. Finally, this art of highly developed surface values draws the viewer in, but does not trespass into his world. Before the nineteenth century the figures in Persian painting almost never look directly at the viewer. Later, when they do, they keep their emotions to themselves. Yet, the most gifted Persian artists could capture their sitters’ character without invading their wall of reserve. (Canby 1993: 11-12)
In conclusion, Persian miniatures do display a diffuse composition and grid structure layout. Often the proper structure of the buildings, the architectural structures that compose the painting, help stress this multiple-centered composition dividing the space into blocks. The third dimension is brought to life with the help of receding planes and with several scenes happening simultaneously, therefore achieving that multiple-center or diffuse composition, which is at the same time spatial and temporal.

The isometric system of projection to suggest perspective is used consistently in Persian miniature painting, one of the influences from Chinese traditional painting. Next to this, the vertical composition/vertical perspective is used consistently in Persian miniatures as well. The combination of these two strategies to suggest perspective is, in my opinion, a unique element found in this painting tradition.

4.3 The use of space in nineteenth-century photography in Iran

I will explore in this section the way in which space has been arranged in nineteenth-century Iranian photography (be it due to the photographers’ taste, be it due to technical restrictions of the camera). An immediate question is whether isometrical perspective, diffuse composition, the grid layout structure and vertical composition/vertical perspective are to be found in nineteenth-century photography as they are in traditional Persian painting. As was the case in the previous chapters, another important question to be answered is whether this understanding of space is something peculiar to the Persian visual arts tradition or if it can be found in other countries. It is important to note that isometrical perspective is impossible in photography. As stated by the chief curator of photography at MOMA in the 1990s, Peter Galassi,

the ultimate origins of photography (both technical and aesthetic) lie in the fifteenth-century invention of linear perspective. The technical side of this statement is simple: photography is nothing more than a means for automatically producing pictures in linear perspective. The aesthetic side is more complex and is meaningful only in broader historical terms. (Galassi 1981: 12)

Therefore, as far as the topic on isometrical projection is concerned, there is no possible argumentation when related to photography: no matter who is behind the camera, an Italian, Iranian or Malawian photographer, the result will always be a photograph in true linear perspective, as a result of the monocular viewpoint, which is also the basis of Alberti’s theory of linear perspective. I have established different categories of photographs in order to be able to study in depth the different spatial characteristics
present in Persian traditional painting as well as in photography. I have
named the first group diffuse compositions/grid structure and the second
vertical composition/vertical perspective.

The first group that I have defined is diffuse composition/grid structure,
a term that means, as I elaborated in the previous section, the presence of
multiple centers of attention within the photographic space. In order to un-
derstand it fully and to be able to give enough examples of the composi-
tion used in nineteenth-century Iranian photography, I will broaden my
scope and consider other kinds of photographs besides portrait studio
photographs, since it is difficult to find those Persian elements of composi-
tion (diffuse compositions, grid layout structure and vertical composition)
in them. I will start with a photograph taken by an unknown Iranian photo-
grapher in which a group of schoolboys are depicted together with their
teachers from the school Nawbar in Tabriz. We can see that there is no spe-
cial center of attention. On the contrary, the eye can scan the whole content
of the picture freely and without a fixed path (fig. 130). See, for instance,
the window on the right, full of people, in the same way that miniatures
present different scenes, all with the same importance as far as information
is concerned, as we have seen previously. These are examples of Rudrauf’s
diffuse composition. Further, we can also make an abstraction of the photo-
graph and we get a grid structure as we did before with a miniature. There
is an especially remarkable photograph of a group of schoolchildren gath-
ered together to celebrate a special school event (fig. 131) in Moshiriyec’s
school in Yazd. The way in which the space has been depicted is interest-
ing. See the left half of the image, where a group of teachers is depicted
sitting around a huge table and the upper right part of the image in which
a large group of schoolboys has been densely packed in a reduced space,al-
most ascending up to the ceiling. Here the monocular linear perspective of
the table drives the eye from the front to the back. This photograph is, in-
deed, a good example to illustrate the fact that photography is a perfect
technique to produce pictures in perfect linear perspective. But, at the same
time, the general aspect of the image is that of miniatures, with their multi-
ple centers of attention and grid layout structure. The Persian carpets that
are hung on the walls, fully covering them, help to give the final image the
appearance of a miniature. Notice the three men on the balcony in the top
left of the image, looking downwards, as in many miniatures, at what is
happening in the hall. Another example of a photograph where this mini-
ture-like structure is clear is figure 132. These kinds of images are exam-
pies of what I introduced above about the “invasion” of space by people.
Here it is important to remark that the possible parallels that I may estab-
lish between photography and miniatures are only valid from a pure formal
point of view. The important temporal and spatial narrative dimension pre-
sent in the miniatures I have analyzed in the previous sections, is some-
thing that the photographs do not have. Further, the fact that the miniature
belongs to a book that has its precise place between the previous miniature and the following one is fundamental and needs to be pointed out in order to avoid confusion or to arrive at false conclusions.

The second group of photographs is vertical composition. An interesting photograph is one that depicts a group of seven men arranged in two rows, occupying two horizontal planes, and dividing the photographic space into two identical halves, in two independent spaces (fig. 133). The governor of Kerman is depicted sitting on a carpet on the lower row, on the left of the image, next to two colleagues. The carpet bends along the stair to become the carpet on which the other four men on the upper row are also sitting. The plane of the photographer has been lowered in order to get a frontal image where the whole group is packed within the photograph's horizontal frame. The formal parallelism in the vertical composition between this photograph and figure 121 (see full color section) is remarkable. This is interesting, since isometric projection suggests birdeye's perspective.

One extreme example of this vertical composition is an image that displays the most bizarre composition of a group of people – in this case four men – that I have found during my research (fig. 134). The original glass plate is partially broken, so we can only see in the print four heads of the five military men depicted. The heads of the four men have been arranged on a vertical line, fully covering the vertical photographic frame. The photograph was taken by the Iranian photographer Mirzā Mehdi Chehreh-Namā, who ran a very well-known studio in Isfahan.

There are several photographs that I have found during my research that show an aesthetic approach similar to those of the miniatures. This effect is caused, as I will explain shortly, by the technical restrictions of the camera rather than by an aesthetical intention of the photographer. I will call this group optical illusions. Nāser al-Din Shah took the next two photographs considered here. The two women depicted in these images, seem to have been pasted onto the blurred backdrop, giving them the impression that they are partially floating in the photographic space. This probably happens due to the technical restrictions of the camera rather than due to an aesthetical effect intended by the photographer, but the perception of both of them is similar to those of the miniatures and this effect is reinforced by the carpet, clothing and pose of these women. Notice that here the presence of the carpet is an important element that conditions the perception of the space by the viewer of the final image, as was the case in the previous picture. The first one depicts Iran al-Moluk (fig. 135), daughter of Nāser al-Din Shah. The second depicts Bakhbaubashi (the one to the left), one of the wives of Nāser al-Din Shah (fig. 136), the receding stairs giving a true perspective to the final image. In both pictures there is a separation between the foreground and the background, therefore a linear perspective as I have already pointed out at the beginning of this section.
Within this group, we could consider another sub-group of photographs, which show another peculiar element to be found in some nineteenth-century Iranian photographs: the use of the middle horizon in the photographic space. As we know from the laws of composition in Western photography, one should not place the horizon exactly in the middle of the photograph. But if we analyze the next two photographs, we clearly see that this is exactly what happened: a row of kneeling mullahs (religious men) is placed in the upper half of the photographic space, just starting at the horizon line or the middle line of the photograph, leaving an empty and wide space in the lower half of the image (figs. 137 and 138). Actually this is just an optical illusion, since there is a carpet in both photographs that, as a result of the bad quality of the print that lost its sharpness, we cannot see clearly. Further, the placing of the horizon right in the middle of the photographs is most probably due to technical restrictions of the camera, because the photographer needed to lower his camera in order to take a frontal image of the group and therefore, the carpet or floor, would have taken a dominant role in the image. It is important to note that this way of arranging the space is only found in photography and therefore peculiar to this medium due to technical restrictions of the camera, since it is not found in Persian traditional painting, where the lower half of the image is especially important in its content and density of information. Next to this kind of image, there is another one that depicts men as if they were floating in the air. I have selected one photograph to illustrate this spatial illusion. A portrait of Hājī Hoseyn Quli Khān Nuri Mostowfi, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, taken by an anonymous Iranian photographer (fig. 139). Next to this kind of images, there is one that is interesting as a collage and because of the spatial arrangement of the three women depicted therein, all of them floating in the photographic space (fig. 140). This is actually the page of one of the albums of Nāser al-Din Shah’s wives. Three full portraits of women have been cut out and pasted directly onto the album page and the final image presents a peculiar understanding of space since the three identical women are literally floating on the album page like the men in the previous two portraits. This kind of collage became quite popular amongst the Shah and his family, since they appear quite regularly in the albums’ pages in the last years of his reign. An important difference between this last image and the previous photograph is that, in the collage, the photographer would be the one that decided to give the floating effect to the sitters, not the camera!

It has often been remarked that the lower part of a visual pattern demands more weight. As stated by Arnheim,

gravitation is probably at the root of this asymmetry in the vertical dimension, but how its effect on vision comes about is not known. The compensation, which keeps the lower part of a pattern from
looking too light or too small, is needed everywhere, except for the structurally strong shapes, which resist the distortion of angles. It cannot be maintained, however, that general artistic practice makes patterns look heavier at the bottom — that is, lowers the center of gravity. True, in the landscape that man, the land animal, sees around himself, the lower part of the visual field is crowded with buildings, fields, trees, and events whereas the sky is relatively empty. A corresponding effect is sought in the arts wherever the realistic representation of solid bodies is intended. By lowering the center of gravity, the painter or sculptor adapts his work to the asymmetry of physical space. This practice, however, is not universal. It goes with certain styles only. For instance, modern art — because of its trend towards abstraction — has little use for this uneven distribution of masses. (Arnheim 1969: 20-21)

This is also true for some Iranian photographers active in the nineteenth century. For instance, in those images of a group of kneeling religious men, they actually seem to be levitating while being photographed and they do have, indeed, a very light appearance.

There is another group of photographs that can be considered as a subgroup of the one I am now analyzing. Plan-perpendicular shows the use of this way of understanding space. One of the peculiarities encountered in the Iranian style is the representation of sitters themselves in the perspective, above a patterned carpet that is shown in plan-perpendicular (straight-from-above) view and has no particular relationship to the rest of the studio setting, as we can see in the photograph where a man sitting on a chair is depicted (fig. 141). This image of Mohammad Ebrahim Khān Me’mārbāshi, Minister of Defense and head of the Tehran department, presents as well an illusionary perception of the sitters, as if they were floating on the air. This element is also typical of the Indian photography of that time. We can see an obvious resemblance between this image and fig. 142 (see full color section), an 1885 album print taken by an unknown Indian photographer and painted partially with opaque watercolor where a music-loving landowner is depicted. The image shows him sitting, his face, hands and feet remaining photographic. Flatness of space is achieved through the way the carpet is painted, as in miniatures. Also the lack of shadows in the colors helps this non-perspective element of space. As the art historian and critic Judith Mara Gutman states in her book Through Indian Eyes. 19th and Early 20th Century Photography from India,

when photography was introduced to India in the nineteenth century, photographic expression followed the same pattern as paintings did. Photographers made photographs that emulated the space and subjects found in Indian paintings, using the patterns and forms that
streamed through their aesthetic traditions; this ultimately changed
the place, role, function, and representation of those patterns in
photographs. Many photographs were composed with the same spa-
tial arrangements that existed in paintings. (Gutman 1982: 69)

In sum, the grid layout typical of the Persian miniatures is also to be found
in Iranian photographs that depict large groups of people spread over a
more or less large space, be it the entrance of a school, a room in a school,
a market, a theater, palace, etc. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the
grid-like structure found in photographs was consciously displayed by
Iranian photographers. People seem to completely inhabit the given space,
and the final result (the photograph taken by the photographer who was in
front of the scene without interacting with it), formally, resembles the grid
layout structure and multiple centers of attention that I have analyzed in
detail in the sections concerned with miniatures. Next to this, a vertical
tendency towards organizing the sitters is also to be noted. The majority of
the miniatures is vertical, whereas most of the group photographs of the
kind analyzed here are horizontal, which could be explained in technical
terms (but I say this very carefully as further research is needed in order to
fully prove this hypothesis). Since the majority of the miniatures is used as
a page in a book it seems that the artists find themselves with no choice
but the vertical arrangement. In this respect the photographers do not feel
such limitations and as a result the horizontal arrangements of sitters in the
case of large groups of people are commonly found in the photographs of
the period. It is important to note that the conclusions drawn here are ex-
clusively from a formal approach. The placement of the horizon in the
middle of the photographic space is something peculiar to some Iranian
photographs and this, most probably, happens in this way due to technical
restrictions of the camera rather than a self-conscious or unconscious
aesthetic approach of the photographer to achieve this particular effect.
Photographers, in this sense, did not arrange the space. The camera did that
for them. They did frame the part of reality that they wanted to show and
composed the final image within that frame.

I have shown through visual analysis of the paintings and photographs
selected for this chapter that the understanding of space is one of the cul-
tural components involved in the process of producing a painting or a
photograph, even if later technical limitations of the camera definitely play
a role in the final image. I have created a theoretic model to classify my
corpus of paintings and photographs according to spatial components. For
the paintings corpus I have defined three groups: diffuse composition/grid
structure; isometrical perspective and vertical composition/vertical struc-
ture. For the photographic corpus I have defined two groups: diffuse com-
position/grid structure and vertical composition/vertical perspective.
Persian miniatures employ diffuse composition and grid structure layout to
achieve multiple-center or diffuse composition that is at the same time spatial and temporal. Furthermore, by using the isometric system of projection they provide a consistent usage of space, one of the many influences of Chinese traditional painting on Persian miniature painting. However, the combination of these two strategies to suggest space is, in my opinion, unique to the traditional Persian miniature.

Notes

1 Prominent Japanese philosopher, founder of what has been called the Kyoto School of Philosophy.
2 In Leiden, September 2008. I am very grateful to Helen Westgeest for her ideas and reading of the photographs and paintings selected for this chapter, especially regarding the topic of axonometry/isometrical perspective and grid structure layout.
3 Williamson 1986.
4 Wellesz 1936.
5 The Zafar-nameh is an epic poem written by the Persian poet Hamdollah Mostowfi (d. 1334). The epic history explores Iranian history from the Arab conquest to the Mongols. Dunham 1949.
6 Nizami-ye Ganjavi (1140-1202), who is considered the greatest romantic epic poet in Persian literature, brought a coloquial and realistic style to the Persian epic. His Khamsa consisted of 5 poems written in the form of couplets: Makhzan al-Asrar (“Treasure of Secrets”, 1177); Khosrov and Shirin (1180); Leyla and Majnun (1188); Haft Paikar (“Seven Beautiful Girls”, 1196) and Iskandar-Nama (1203, usually divided into the Sharaf-Nama, which deals with Iskandar’s conquests, and the Iqbal-Nama, which deals with his prophetic mission). For general information, see, Rypka, J.R. Rypka (1968), History of Iranian Literature. Dordrecht: 210-219.
7 Adle 1975. I am grateful to Oleg Grabar for directing me to this article and for his comments of this chapter.
8 The invention of linear perspective in Western art in the Renaissance was achieved through the discovery of the mathematical principles that underly the concept of perspectivity by the Arab polymath Abu Ali Ibn al-Hasan Ibn al-Haitham (965-1040), known in the West as Alhazen. He made significant contributions to the principles of optics, anatomy, visual perception and to science in general with his introduction to the scientific model. See: Saliba, G. (2007), Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance, Cambridge; and “al-Haytam”, in Onians, J. (2007), Neuroarthistory. From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki, New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 38-41
9 Taken from Krikke 1996.
10 Interview in Leiden, December 2008.
12 Humay and Humayan is a medieval Persian romance written by the Persian poet Khwaju Kirmani (1280- 1352). For further information see “Humay and Humayan: A Medieval Persian Romance”, in Annali Instituto Italiano per il Medio e Estremo Oriente, Roma, 1990: 347-57.
“The Book of the Kings” is the national epic of Iran written by the Persian master of poetry Abu al-Qasim Firdowsi (934-1025). He devoted 35 years to write the Shahname and this is he most studied of all Persian manuscripts, which was never finished.

Sheikh Sa'di (full name: Mosleh al-Din Moshref ibn Abdollāh), born in Shiraz (1184-1283) is one of the major Persian poets of the medieval period. He is recognized not only for the quality of his writing, but also for the depth of his sociological thoughts. His best known works are Bustān (The Orchard) completed in 1257 and Gulistan (The Rose Garden) in 1258. Bustān is entirely in verse (epic meter) and consists of stories to illustrate the good virtues recommended to Muslims and also includes reflections of the behavior of dervishes and their ecstatic practices.

Farid ad-Din Attar (1142-1220) was a Muslim scholar and Sufi mystic. “The Language of the Birds” is a book of poems of approximately 4,500 lines. The poem uses a journey by a group of 30 birds, led by a hoopoe as an allegory of a Sufi sheikh or master leading his pupils to enlightenment.