Local Portraiture

Pérez González, Carmen

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
CONCLUSION

Nineteenth-century Western photographers constructed other culture’s realities as much as Iranian photographers constructed their own. Both groups of photographers produced their own constructed realities of the same “reality” and the result of each process of construction was deeply influenced by the cultural background of the photographer. Studios were nothing more than mere theaters where, both sitters and photographers, could eternally freeze the image that they wanted others and themselves to see. The Western creations were done, only in part, in line with Orientalist photography that was fashionable at that time and practiced in other “exotic” countries such as Algeria or Egypt. The Iranian photographs were influenced both by the Iranian pictorial tradition and by the Western (i.e. Victorian) model. Nevertheless, regardless of their nationality, photographers did not fail to submit to fashion when producing for the tourist market, for which the cultural origins of the photographer were of little importance. These elaborated representations never failed to reflect the ideology of their epoch. Iran was not a commercial country at all as far as its photographic material is concerned; therefore commercial photography has almost NO relevance regarding the amount of photographic material produced in Iran in the nineteenth century, and it can be almost reduced exclusively to the work of Antoin Sevruguin. Iran was not on the route of the steamers going from Europe to Japan and this was one of the reasons why commercial photography did not flourish there as it did massively in other Asian countries.

For my dissertation (the materia prima for this book), I conducted a thorough visual analysis of photographic material and developed a model to visually analyze and compare corpuses of photographs and paintings. This model aims to strip images of their cultural components in a multilayered process in the same way, but in the reversed direction, as the images were constructed: images present different elements in a multilayered form and these elements can be analyzed one after the other as if we were peeling off an onion. Further, what I mean by “reversed direction” is that I analyzed the images to define the elements present in the photographs in the contrary direction (temporal and probably also spatial) of the one in which the photographs were taken. The set of cultural components through which I have deconstructed nineteenth-century Iranian photographs is composed of: the direction of the script which leads to a tendency in nineteenth-century Iranian photographers to produce mirror-like images of those produced by their Western colleagues; the use of text within the photographic space; the pose of the sitter; and the understanding of the space. This
constitutes a particular cultural-components-set of Iranian photography in the nineteenth-century. Mirror-like compositions are directly related to the direction of writing of the script; use of text and pose are directly related to the Iranian painting tradition. Space remains the least convincing component for a comparative analysis between painting and photography, since the technical restrictions of the camera seem to play a dominant role in the understanding of the space in photography. If we would conduct the same research with a Japanese, Chinese or Indian photographic corpus, we may find a comparable cultural-component recipe.

The model developed here can be summarized as follows: define the photographic corpus; define the corpus of paintings; conduct a visual analysis of both corpuses to establish differences and similarities between them; define the cultural components found after visual analysis of the photographic and painting material (these cultural components can include some of the ones already defined for Iranian photography, but the final cultural set will probably be different); and lastly, establish categories or groups of photographs that represent the cultural components defined in the previous section. The model could be used also to compare two corpuses of photographs (not necessarily involving paintings): for example, a corpus of photographs taken by Spanish photographers in South America and a second corpus of photographs taken by South American photographers in their own countries, in the nineteenth century. Regardless of the corpuses compared, this method is based on very large corpuses of graphic material.

The cultural-components-set found and defined after pursuing an in-depth visual analysis of the corpuses selected for this dissertation and the interaction between the different disciplines, can be summarized through the next diagram (graphic 2, see full color section):

The basic steps for applying the model are:
1 Build up corpuses of graphic material, gathering as many images as possible from archives, printed books, etc.
2 Cross-visual analyze corpuses of graphic material.
3 Establish hypotheses.
4 Theoretical perspective: once the topics (classification of the images in groups) to study are defined, we have to delve in a historical theoretical perspective for each one of them, in order to make an analysis of the state-of-the-field related to each particular hypothesis (theoretical support of each hypothesis).
5 Establish categories after having tested the hypotheses both theoretically and empirically.

In each chapter, I have analyzed the photographs from one of the four perspectives defined (visual laterality; use of text; pose; and space). To
conclude this book, I would like to come back to a few photographs, which have already been introduced from a multi-perspective point of view, to show that the above listed elements are not isolated phenomena but all share space within the photograph.

The portrait of a kneeling mullah (fig. 75) summarized the different aspects of the Persian visual art tradition present in nineteenth-century Iranian photography: the use of inscriptions; the philosophical understanding of images as powerful tools but in compliance with their inherent features (such as with Sufi philosophy); the poetic tone of the text; the use of traditional objects (tasbi); the traditional kneeling pose of the sitter; and the use of an ornamental frame. Another photograph that presents several characteristic elements found in Persian miniatures is the portrait of the poet Gha’ani (fig. 55): the use of inscriptions; traditional kneeling pose; objects held (water pipe); studio paraphernalia (cushion); and an elaborated passe-partout. The third photograph selected here is the group portrait of the poets in Shiraz (fig. 57): the use of inscriptions (poem); traditional kneeling pose of some of the sitters; objects held (tasbi, flowers); and the omnipresent pots of flowers.

Most of the photographs analyzed in this book present at least two of the Persian elements mentioned above, revealing a different aesthetic approach to the dominant, Victorian model of photography that was in vogue in the nineteenth century. The research conducted in this book has shown that different aesthetic models of representation existed in the nineteenth century, related to their specific socio-political and cultural context, such as in this case Iran.