

Book Review

Montabone's 1862 photos from Iran have left a legacy

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The captivating photographs that Italian photographer Luigi Montabone (?-1877) took in Iran in 1862 are among the most invaluable visual sources for their historical and artistic significance. They not only illuminate the history of Iran in that period but also reflect the admirable finesse with which Montabone discerned the subject matter he explored for the first time. Montabone was commissioned to accompany a group of dignitaries on a scientific and diplomatic mission to Iran to visually document the journey. He prepared several copies of the photographs and presented three albums to Vittorio Emanuele II, Italy; Naser-al-Din Shah, Iran; and presumably Queen Sophei, the Netherlands.

Several scholars studied those photographs and albums, in which just a limited number of the photographs are dissimilar. The albums were published in Italy, the Netherlands, and Iran. In 1972, Angelo Michele Piemontese published the album kept in the Marciana National Library in Venice. Three decades later, in 2003, Herman Vahramiyan and Sergio Poggianella published the catalog *1862 Persia, Immagini di un Viaggio italiano*. In 2004, *The Montabone Album, Ricordi del Viaggio in Persia della Missione Italiana 1862*, edited by: Ferydoun Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doornm, Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar, and Nathalie Farman Farma was published. And finally, in 2012, Mojgan Tarighi published *Iran During the Qajar Dynasty, From the Perspective of Montabone, the Italian Photographer*.

The album presented to Naser-al-Din Shah is kept in Golestan Museum in Tehran. It is not published yet; however, some of the photographs of this album are mentioned in several sources.

The album that Angelo Michele Piemontese published was accompanied by an essay titled “The Photograph Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission to Persia (Summer 1862)” in *East and West*, Vol. 22, no. 3-4, 1972, a magazine published by *Italian Institute for Middle and Far East*, Rome. As the scholar Alberto Prandi states in “Western Literature on the History of Qajar Era Photography, a Bibliographic Essay” published in *Annali Di Ca’ Foscari*, XLVI, 3, **2007, Piemontese’s essay contains details of the journey, diplomatic events, the biography of the missionaries, and the description of the photographs.**

In 2003, *1862 Persia, Immagini di un Viaggio italiano* [1862 Persia, Pictures of an Italian Journey] was published. It is a catalog for an exhibition of Persian art and culture held at Castello Di Belgioioso, in Pavia, in April 5-21, 2003, published by Nicolodi Publications, Rovereto. The language is Italian. Iranian-born Herman Vahramiyan and also Sergio Poggianella curated this exhibition, and a section of it was dedicated to Montabone’s photographs of his journey to Iran from the album preserved in the Royal Library in Torino. Poggianella writes in his introduction that the album contains seventy-two photographs, thirteen of which are monuments and views of the Caucasus. He also references the report by Filippo de Filippi, one of the members of the Torino Academy of Sciences, written in 1865.

The catalog contains some pages of the report by Filippi titled “NOTE DI UN VIAGGIO IN PERSIA NEL 1862” [Notes of a Journey to Persia in 1862]. In this detailed report, Filippi mentions Montabone several times. He states that Montabone was equipped by the most advanced photographic devices bought in Paris, and the fact that this new invention had an irreplaceable historical and scientific value to strengthen the traditional report-writing. He also mentions that Naser-al-Din Shah expressed his interest in seeing the photographs taken by Montabone and also being photographed by him.

Another source is *The Montabone Album, Ricordi del Viaggio in Persia della Missione Italiana 1862*, published by the International Qajar Studies Association and Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doornm & Co's, Rotterdam. It contains the sixty photographs kept in the Royal House Archives in The Hague, the Netherlands, and four essays contributed by Mieke Jansen, Anna Vanzan, Corien Vuurman, and Mohammad Reza Tahmasbpour. The language is English.

Jansen highlights the friendship and political relationship between Iran and the Netherlands from the Safavid period until the end of the Pahlavi Dynasty, particularly Mozafar-al-Din Shah's visit to the Netherlands in 1900. Also, he explains the physical characteristics and the content of the album briefly. Jansen assumes that the album was ordered by Queen Sophei (1818-1877) who probably saw Montabone's photographs in her visit to the World Exhibition in Paris in 1868.

Vanzan introduces the mission's scientists, who specialized in mineralogy, zoology, agriculture, anatomy, and philology. They were in charge of studying

Iran, its nature and people. She provides readers with examples from their reports, some of which were published. Vanzan mentions the opening of the first school of Persian in Italy by Giacomo Lignana, the only Orientalist in this group, and also his unpublished lectures on Persian philology, literature, history and religion.

Vuurman offers a precious list of all known photographers who traveled to Persia from 1844 to 1900. Moreover, she distinguishes the historical and artistic importance of Montabone's photographs, his keen observation and modern approach that led him to pay attention particularly to ordinary people and contemporary architecture instead of merely focusing on ancient monuments and the life of the royalty.

Tahmasbpour introduces Foccheti, Luigi Pesce, Antonio Giannuzzi, and Montabone: four Italian photographers who visited Iran in the nineteenth century. He acknowledges three published sources in which a number of photographs kept in Golestan Museum are attributed to wrong photographers. The first is a catalog of the albums of the Imperial Library (1978) by Badri Atabay, who credits the photograph "the mausoleum of Nader Shah" to Pesce; while this photograph was taken by Giannuzzi in 1866. The second is the article "The beginning of Photography in Iran" by Donna Stein, who attributes the same photograph to Pesce. And third is Yahya Zoka's *The History of Photography and Pioneer Photographs in Iran*, in which an album containing twenty-four photographs is credited to Montabone. Tahmasbpour explains that this album is from Mozaffar-al-Din Shah's era and there is no picture by Montabone in it.

Finally, *Iran During the Qajar Dynasty, From the Perspective of Montabone, the Italian Photographer*, published by Abyaneh Publications in Tehran, contains photographs from the album in the Royal Library in Torino, an introduction by Mojgan Tarighi, a note by Shahriyar Adle, and two essays, one by Mohammad Sattari and one by Carlo G. Cereti. The languages are Farsi and English.

Mojgan Tarighi, the editor of the book and the director of *Aks-khane ye Shahr Museum* in Tehran, first learned about the album by Vahramiyan. The seventy-one 6x6 cm slides that Vahramiyan sent Tarighi motivated her to publish this book for Iranian enthusiasts. Tarighi also delved into the sixty-two photographs in the album in Golestan Museum to compare the two albums.

In a short note, Shahriyar Adle elaborates on the significance of photography in the Qajar era as an expedient tool for documentation. He proclaims the collection of photographs kept in Golestan Museum to be one of the richest and oldest in the world that most likely has no competition except for the Royal Collection in the United Kingdom.

Cereti explains the economic calamities in northern Italy in the 1860s caused by silkworm disease. To help end the crises, the Italian government decided to befriend Iran, providing a bridge to import new silkworms. This was the beginning of the political relationship between Iran (under Naser-al-Din Shah, 1831-1896 A.D.) and Italy (under Vittorio Emanuele II, 1820-1878) that paved the way for Marcello Cerruti's diplomatic mission to Tehran; Montabone also was

sent with this group as the photographer in charge of collecting visual information about Iran.

In his essay, Sattari calls Montabone a prominent photographer of Italy in his time. He notes Montabone's ingenious style and writes that the photographer benefited from the architecture, natural light, and the backgrounds to reflect the personality and status of the models. Sattari writes that these elements allow Montabone's work to succeed beyond mere visual documentation.

In all of the albums a number of photographs are hand-painted by Montabone to look like realistic paintings. They include portraits of Nasser-al-Din Shah, Mozafar-al-Din Mirza and Courtiers, Iranian soldiers and servants, and a Georgian princess.

According to Mojgan Tarighi, there are no photographs of women in the album in Golestan Museum while the other albums contain photographs of women; for instance, three Italian women, two portraits of a Georgian princess, one picture of two Christian girls from Marin, and one portrait of an upper-class Georgian woman. In this respect, the album kept in Golestan Museum is unique. Why Montabone chose not to include photographs of women in the album that he presented to Naser-al-Din Shah remains unrevealed. Conceivably, he took the precaution for political reasons. From our standpoint, it is unlikely that the photographs of unveiled Christian women could be incompatible to Iran-Italy friendship; yet, the nineteenth century mindset of a western individual toward an Islamic nation was quite different from ours.

These books remind us of Montabone's attentive reflection on a multi-layered nation during a sensitive period. Montabone was fortunate to visit Iran during the rule of Naser-al-Din Shah, whose interest in artistic, scientific, and cultural developments created a welcoming and progressive environment for experts. And, perhaps he was one of the few western travelers who did not attempt to Orientalize Iranians, as defined by Edward Said, to satisfy western audience. He impartially and artistically captured the real life of real people.

Montabone received the recognition he deserved in his time. Contemporary sources, too, have given a worldwide perpetuity to Montabone's photographs from his mission to Persia, and the opportunity to the public to study those photographs that were kept behind closed doors for more than a century.

Read this book review in Farsi in: Cheshmak Photography Magazine, University of Tehran, No. 5, Spring 1394 (2016), Tehran (Translated by Afrooz Mosallaeipour)