



*Principe ereditario di Persia Vicere in Tebriz*

Figure 1: Luigi Montabone: *Principe ereditario di Persia Vicere, Tebriz*. Albumen print from a collodion negative, June 22nd, 1862/printed October 29, 1865, 25.8 × 22 cm.

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# Transnational Encounters: A Photograph of Mozaffar al-Din Mirza from an Italian Mission to Persia

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**Abstract** The photograph of the Persian hereditary prince Mozaffar al-Din Mirza embodies a synthesis of distinct visual spheres interacting with one another in a transnational space of artistic creation. The politically defined objective of Luigi Montabone commissioned to photograph the Italian diplomatic mission to Persia in 1862, the visual politics of the Persian sovereign and their encounter in the social space of the freshly proclaimed crown prince gives rise to a political iconography of power consolidation and dynastic national identity. Yet, the subsequent reception of the photograph epitomizes the process of meaning construction in heterogeneous social spaces.

**Keywords** Luigi Montabone, Qajar Iran, Temporal Semantic, Political Iconography, Transnational Encounter

The photograph of the Persian hereditary prince Mozaffar al-Din Mirza (1853–1907) is from a photographic album with the descriptive title “Ricordi del viaggio in Persia della Missione Italiana 1862” (The Photograph Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission to Persia 1862). This photograph is a synthesis of distinct visual spheres interacting with one another in the transnational space of artistic creation. In question are, first, the politically defined objective of the photographer, Luigi Montabone (?–1877), who was commissioned to record the diplomatic mission; second, the visual politics of the Qajar ruler Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896) intending to construct a dynastic identity both domestically and transnationally by uniting modernity with conservatism; and, third, their encounter in the social space of the Crown Prince Mozaffar al-Din Mirza, freshly proclaimed and yet frail for the years of uncertainty about the royal line of succession. The interplay of those previously parallel spheres and spaces gives rise to a political iconography that, in the photograph, defines a power constellation and sense of dynastic-national identity: the sovereignty of Naser al-Din Shah emanating from the portrait is transferred to and transforms the perception of Mozaffar al-Din Mirza. Yet, the photograph is of interest not just for the time-transcending interaction of visual spheres but also for the dynamic transformation of the image in its subsequent reception in heterogeneous social spaces. Its reception reveals the variety of demystifying contexts and processes of generating meanings in spaces of cultural encounter or “contact zones.”

On April 21st, 1862, a diplomatic mission of the newly founded Kingdom of Italy (1861–1946) headed for Persia. Its objective was to attain strategic alliances on a geopolitical scale and tap untouched economic trade potentials. In addition to diplomatic, military, and trade sections, the mission also included a group of interdisciplinary scientists as well as two photographers, the Piemontese Luigi Montabone and his Venetian assistant Alberto Pietrobbon (active 1862–1887), lending additional weight to the mission’s political pursuits. Provided with the latest equipment, the photographers were specifically commissioned to illustrate the final mission report with images of political and diplomatic encounters and, secondarily, archaeological monuments, inscriptions, and portraits of important personalities. In addition, they were instructed to produce visual documents “meet[ing] the needs of the various professors, the naturalists in particular” (Piemontese 1972, 260–261).

The itinerary of the Italian mission to Tehran, the capital of Qajar Iran, retraced an ancient trade route that has been central for centuries not only for trade purposes but also for the cross-cultural exchange of ideas, innovations, and artistic productions (► **Cultural Transfer**). Treading such historical paths, the mission headed from Genoa via the still heavily Persian-influenced city of Yerevan and across the Araxes River, the Perso-Russian border politically enforced by Russia, to Tabriz, their first destination in Persian territory, which they reached on June 20st, 1862. There, in the capital of the north-western province of Azerbaijan, they encountered

a rather special political environment: Following a long established tradition, public celebrations had been held just a few days prior to mark the proclamation of the eight-year-old Prince Mozaffar al-Din Mirza as heir to throne of Persia and Governor-General of Azerbaijan (Piemontese 1972, 258, 294; Amanat 1997, 400–402). During an official audience granted to the delegation on June 22nd, Montabone produced a number of photographs of Mozaffar al-Din Mirza, his advisers, ministers, and dignitaries, including the portrait discussed here.

The photograph of Mozaffar al-Din Mirza was taken in the courtyard of the royal palace *Bag-e Shomal* (North Garden), as indicated by the brick pillar at the far left. Yet the intentionally furnished space with the tableau next to Mozaffar al-Din Mirza and carpets covering the ground evoke the impression of an interior. The parallel patterns of the larger carpet, though partly interrupted by the smaller one, add a sense of spatial depth. The lines fanning out across the lower area of the photograph direct the gaze towards the sickly, lifeless prince, who is placed along a horizontal line running across the center of the image. Dressed in a velvet tunic elaborately embroidered with floral designs and patterns and wearing a tall black astrakhan hat, Mozaffar al-Din Mirza is shown frontally, the chair to his right, the painting to his left. While the prince's right hand rests on the chair, his left grabs the hilt of his sword in a gesture of authority. The angled arrangement of the tableau suggests a break with the traditionally frontal presentation of a subject and inevitably shifts the attention to the painting and its subject: Naser al-Din Shah as he is towering on his horse, his gaze intently fixed on the viewer. The equestrian portrait makes the King tower protectively and authoritatively over his heir. This intra-pictorial composition entails a change in perception: as the gaze follows the directionality of the trotting horse, it returns to Mozaffar al-Din Mirza whose image is now endowed with a sense of power and authority emanating from the portrait of Naser al-Din Shah. By means of this special setting, Montabone created an image of transnational significance that simultaneously asserts Naser al-Din Shah's sovereignty and consolidates Mozaffar al-Din Mirza's position as heir to the throne and as Viceroy of Persia.

The portrait of Naser al-Din Shah is paradigmatic for the correlation between socio-political changes and dynastic visual traditions. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a profound cultural revival unfolded as Qajar rulers sought to legitimize their claim to power by invoking the glorious Persian past. This revival manifested itself in myriad life-size murals and oil paintings of a glorified ruler, often surrounded by his sons, chiefs of the Qajar tribes, domestic officials, or foreign envoys (Diba 1998, 32–35). From the mid-century on, however, the dynastic iconography moved away from monumental imagery in lineage of traditional kingships. Instead, it turned towards promoting an image of a sovereign who unites modernity with conservatism to renegotiate Persia's standing on the geopolitical landscape. As a result of this shift in image politics, a local school of small-scale portraiture emerged during the 1850s and 1860s, whose visual language,

whilst rooted in traditional Persian imagery, incorporated a European-style academic painting (Diba and Ekhtiar 1998, 239–241).

Wearing a semi-European-style uniform with a tall hat and an imperial aigrette, Naser al-Din Shah towers on his horse, drawing all attention from the rugged landscape and the city portal in the background to himself. Contrary to the traditional iconography of rulers engaged in heroic battle or hunting, which had been prevalent from pre-Islamic to early Qajar equestrian portraits, paintings such as this tended to depict the King in a more moderate, personal manner. During Naser al-Din Shah's rule, equestrian portraits thus functioned as individual affirmations of the sovereign's power. Even though it has not been possible to identify with certainty the painter of the equestrian portrait in Montabone's photograph, it bears close affinity to the local school of portraiture founded by the Georgian Akop Ovnanian (1806–1881/1884), who enjoyed the patronage of the Persian court for many years and later moved to Tabriz. (► **Cultural mobility**). This school distinguished itself by blending the canons of Georgian, Russian, and Persian court painting (Diba and Ekhtiar 1998, 245).

At the prince's court, the visual sphere embedded in the equestrian portrait of Naser al-Din Shah meets a very different one, that of Luigi Montabone, the photographer. Montabone's photographic perspective is informed not just by aesthetic considerations but also by the geo-political agendas of both the Qajar court and the Italian Kingdom. Conflating cultural and political codes, Montabone places the equestrian portrait of Naser al-Din Shah next to the Crown Prince in a metaphorical allusion to dynastic continuity and national identity. In doing so, he draws on a visual language of power to construct a transnational image of a sovereign Iran that is qualified as a suitable ally of the Kingdom of Italy. Montabone's photograph of Mozaffar al-Din Mirza is thus the point of intersection of a threefold interaction between various visual spheres meeting in a space of cultural encounter that, in terms of image making, transcends national boundaries.

The contact inherent in the photograph is echoed across heterogeneous social spaces of reception. Multipliable ad infinitum, the dynamic reception of this and other photographs from the diplomatic mission in Italy deserves further mention. Upon its return from Persia, the diplomatic mission was ridiculed for having failed to meet its political and economic objectives. Similarly, the scientific achievements and knowledge transfer, considerable though they were, were not noticed, let alone appreciated (Piemontese 1972, 301–302). While the politico-economic context of the mission gradually sunk into oblivion, Montabone's photographs were widely published, exhibited, and marketed (► **Circulation**). Their popularity in Italy was driven by the contemporary public demand for views of historic sites and ancient cultures (► **East/West**) that had prompted photographic firms such as Borgi and Alinari to undertake their own photographic expeditions to Egypt, Syria, and the Holy Land (Tomassini 1996, 57–59).

A series of short articles about the mission published in *La Gazzetta del Popolo* between April and November 1863 set in motion the circulation of Montabone's photographs. Interestingly, these articles preceded the official albums presented to the Persian King in 1864, the King of Italy, and other personalities (Bonetti and Prandi 2013, 29). The presentation of the photographs at the 1867 world's fair in Paris and at the 1868 National Exhibition in Turin greatly contributed to their dissemination. Further fueled by the increased publication of European travelogues about Persia from the mid-nineteenth century, the demand for Montabone's photographs grew steadily, culminating in orders of complete copies of his albums, for instance by Queen Sophie of the Netherlands (1816–1877) (see Jansen 2004, 9). Remarkably, Montabone's photographs were also translated (► **Translation**) into other media, with the images being placed in new semantic relations: The photograph of Mozaffar al-Din Mirza, for example, served as the model for a woodcut of the Persian king and his heir, which was published in *L'Illustration* in 1869 (Bonetti and Prandi 2013, 30–31). As a matter of fact, even Montabone himself evoked new semantic relations for his photographs, particularly through his use of the Persian lion-and-sun emblem as a paradigmatic analogy. Issuing from a complex genealogy of Zoroastrian, Jewish, Shi'ite, Turkish, and Persian symbols and domains of signification, the centuries-long use of the Lion-and-Sun culminated in its adoption as the official emblem of Qajar Iran in 1836 (Najmabadi 2005, 63–79). While traveling Persia, the delegation must have encountered the emblem as it was widespread across various media, ranging from Qajar insignias to visual decorations. By using the lion-and-sun emblem in his photographic imprints and as hallmarks on his cabinet cards, Montabone caused the emblem to be perceived in a new light independent of its cultural-political significance as an iconic symbol of Iranian national identity (► **Nation**) (for examples see Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doorn 2004, 23, 27; Cavanna 2013, 21).

Despite the widely accepted authenticity and objectivity of Montabone's photographs—and the fact that they therefore transcended the common tropes of 'Orientalist' photography—the social space of their reception in Italy and the West was largely shaped by a constellation of graduated power and a European vision of the 'Orient' (► **Orientalism**). In this additional dimension of cultural encounter, the semantics of Montabone's photographs was defined independent of the mission's political agency. While Montabone integrated visual spheres to create transnational images of power that appealed to both Qajar Iran and the Kingdom of Italy, their political meaning became obsolete in the social space of reception. This illustrates how a process of constructing meaning multiplies across cultural encounters or "contact zones" through the interaction of visual spheres and social spaces.

## Figure

Fig. 1: © Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice.

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