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Introduction

Visualizing Iran: From Antiquity to the Present

This special issue brings together eight articles that examine the visualization of Iran ranging from the Achaemenids to contemporary Iranian society, providing a glimpse into the array of representations in and of Iran. Even as a snapshot they allow a bird's-eye view of the historic role of visual culture in shaping, influencing, and transforming Iranian cultures over successive centuries. An immensely rich visual culture has always existed in Iran and the surrounding regions, often shaped by encounters with different zones of contact and patronized by ruling elites and dynasties with myriad artistic and cultural traditions, needs, and agendas. This special issue is a tribute to that rich cultural history.

Since antiquity, the potency of the image was recognized and utilized, particularly by those in positions of power. Images became powerful tools in constructing conceptions of both the "self" and the "other." Iran was defined and presented by both insiders and outsiders. Some of the earliest surviving images of Persians are found in Greek depictions of the Persian king and court as an attempt at distinguishing Greek identity from that of the Persians. The significance of the visual in defining and presenting Iran and Iranians by these outsiders is examined in two of the articles in this issue. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones examines the depictions of the Persians in Greek material culture between 380 and 330 BCE, and Yuka Kadoi analyzes the early twentieth century architectural photographs of Arthur Upham Pope in Iran. The other six contributions investigate image-making within Iran. The constructions of the ruling elite are studied by Janet Morgan in the ancient visual motifs of Darius's imperial structure, the Apadana, as well as in two articles by Sheila Blair and Robert Hillenbrand, who scrutinize the medieval illustrations in Rashid al-Din's *World History*. Recognizing the double-edged potential of the image as a political tool to further or criticize agendas, those in power have been reluctant to relinquish control over visual productions, establishing tight mechanisms to keep them in check. However, alternatives to hegemonic narratives continue to be produced. The dissident discourse encoded in the surrealist motifs of Espahbod's paintings is studied in the article by Aida Foroutan, whereas the ordinary, peripheral and marginalized, seldom appearing in elite history, are examined in the two articles on Iranian cinema by Chris Lippard and Nacim Pak-Shiraz. This Special Issue thus brings together a range of represen-

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tations, from kings, prophets, and majestic monuments, to the forgotten and marginal strata of society.

The less-explored fourth-century image of Persia in Greek art is examined by Llewellyn-Jones. He argues that the arts produced between 380 and 330 BCE depict more a fascination with Persian court life than an attempt to reproduce an "orientalist" view of the Persians. He reads the earlier negative depictions of Persians in Greek arts as a response to the "terror that the Greeks had so clearly felt during Xerxes' invasion, which itself resulted in two decades' worth of artistic images intended to belittle, humiliate, demean, and distance the Persian foe." However, with increased diplomacy and trade between the two empires in the fourth century, rather than constructing the "barbarian" in an attempt to define Greek self-identity and concealing the real power structures, the depictions of Persian court life in Greek art are about something different. They are "motivated as much by the desire to own, enjoy, and indulge in the lifestyle they show as they are by the inherent Greek need to express difference and diversity." Llewellyn-Jones reads the Greek arts through a different lens that is not simply an antagonist depiction of the Persians or a real reflection of Persian court and society. It is as much a reflection of Greek concerns and fascinations as it is of the Persians.

The visual program of the Achaemenid king's power displayed through the audience hall of Apadana at Persepolis is examined by Janett Morgan. Instead of focusing on the tribute procession relief which has attracted most academic attention, Morgan redirects our gaze to the image of the bull. By examining the earliest form and decoration of the building, she provides an insight into the function and impact these images had on the subjects and visitors who entered Apadana. She contrasts the staircase mural images of the bulls attacked by lions to the calm bulls sitting atop the seventy-two monumental columns in the Apadana. These images of the bulls were used to emphasize the king's role as the protector of the viewer who had to pass by the dangerous scenes and the threatening lions as they ascended the stairs. Once they arrived within the hall, and into the presence of the king, the calm sitting figures of the bulls alluded to "the king's ability to protect both bull and viewer." As such, the king placed himself above all the other elites who would be in his presence, acting as both a warning to any potential threats to his power and displaying his wealth as the owner of the largest herd.

Arguably amongst the most valuable treasures in the library of the University of Edinburgh is an Arabic copy of Rashid al-Din's *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*. Dating back to 1314 and with seventy illustrations, it is one of the first and most highly illustrated historical texts produced in Iran. Two of the articles in this issue examine the illustrations of the Edinburgh fragment. Sheila Blair discusses the reasons behind Rashid al-Din's choice to commit to the laborious, expensive, and unprecedented process of adding illustrations to the historical text. She further argues that within the multicultural context of Iran, visual motifs were relatively easier to transfer across cultures than literary ones. This would certainly add to the appeal of Rashid al-Din's text, particularly amongst the Ilkhanid courtiers not necessarily versed in Arabic or Persian. On the other hand, manuscript illustrators in Rashid al-Din's

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atelier, being one of the first of its kind, turned to existing models in creating their illustrations. They drew their inspiration from existing sources such as books and gifts brought to the Ilkhanid court by various embassies, and their models were both western and east Asian. In analyzing four paintings in depth, Blair demonstrates how the artists did not simply copy the visual motifs but also "seem to have understood some of the metaphorical meanings behind the images and, like their contemporaries elsewhere, used the paintings to comment on and enhance the text."

Robert Hillenbrand studies seven illustrations from the Edinburgh fragment of Rashid al-Din's *World History* in detail. He demonstrates how these are not merely decorative elements within the text that have been added on. Instead, they are able to bring out the parallels between the various narratives that might not be obvious or even exist within the text itself. As such, by studying the illustrations of Moses, who after Muhammad is the most depicted prophet in the manuscript, Hillenbrand evaluates the various reasons for this preponderance of images of Moses. After examining a number of possibilities proposed for these illustrations, Hillenbrand argues that the manuscript appears to draw parallels between the two prophets, suggesting a proximity beyond the huge gaps of time and context between the two. The images highlight the similarities between these two great prophets, a matter that would have been particularly significant when displayed in cities with a significant Jewish population. The two articles by Sheila Blair and Robert Hillenbrand complement each other, although they disagree on their views of the origins of the two fragments of the Rashid al-Din manuscripts. Blair believes that the same manuscript has been divided between the Edinburgh University Library and the Khalili Collection, while Hillenbrand argues to the contrary, stating that they are each fragments from different copies of *The World History*.

The architectural photography of Arthur Pope between 1929 and 1939 is studied in the article by Yuka Kadoi. Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was particularly sensitive to western depictions of his country, had given Pope privileged access to religious buildings, making him one of the first westerners to receive such permission. By subscribing to this cultural ideology, Pope was able to document not only the exterior of the monuments but also their interior decorations. In addition to their publication in books and display in exhibitions, Pope's photographs have become an invaluable cultural source. They have preserved details of buildings, some of which have subsequently been lost during the preservation process. His photographs are therefore "of both art-historical and art-historiographical significance." The large photographic exhibitions and books that Pope published not only spurred academic debate on Iranian architecture but also introduced the country to the wider public outside Iran.

The encryptions of Alireza Espahbod's post-revolutionary surrealist paintings are examined by Aida Foroutan. Suggesting that surrealism in Iran should not be understood as a western importation but instead as "an artistic language ... rendered into the Iranian cultural context." She demonstrates the recurring symbols and intertextual references in his works, which collectively turns them into a strip of images with amplified intended meaning and narrative. Theriomorphic, veiled, or partially painted figures are some of the recurring symbols in his paintings pointing to the

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depiction of mystery and concealment. Foroutan proposes that not only are the intended hidden messages conveyed but that these motifs also reflect the art itself, which has to remain concealed from society due to censorship.

The unstudied relationship between technology, cars, and humor in contemporary Iranian art films is undertaken by Chris Lippard. Acknowledging the fluid, deeply contextual and ever-changing nature of humor, Lippard analyzes a number of recent productions to argue that certain tropes reappear in Iranian films that are popular at festivals and produce a particular type of humor. One of the recurrent motifs in these films is the failure of technologies in the periphery resulting in the humorous. These "mechanical failures often serve as metaphors for the breakdown of social relations." Lippard examines the complexity of the terms peripherality and humor, and their appeal to festival audiences. Peripherality has been interpreted variously as not simply geographical but also the marginal in society. In visualizing Iran, these films critically examine the complex encounter of Iranian society with technology. However, new technology has also released visual productions from the direct grip of the state, enabling filmmakers to present an image of Iran that is not defined by the state.

Cinema has contributed widely to contemporary constructions and images of hegemonic masculinity. In my own contribution to the present collection I study marginal men who by the very nature of their status remain peripheral to social discourse—let alone have the means to utilize the power of the image in furthering lofty agendas such as the powerful kings and viziers studied in the earlier articles. By focusing on three post-2005 films, I examine marginal masculinity, which is not simply the alienation and despair of the dejected men, but often the traditional values and ideas of chivalry in contemporary Iranian society.

Most studies of visual culture are normally siloed into diverse media and periods such that investigations of ancient Iranian history are rarely presented in the same volume as studies of medieval and/or contemporary Iran. Similarly, research on surrealist Persian painting will seldom accompany surveys on medieval manuscript illustrations or Greek pottery from 380BCE, not to mention film. The need for discrete disciplinary or historical collections is certainly far from exhausted. Nevertheless, by examining visual culture across various media and periods one is able to detect parallels, continuities, and discontinuities that bring about a deeper understanding of the field, including of the politics of the image and representations. This special issue hopes to initiate these deeper understandings and dialogues.

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