

Chief Editor's introduction

This special volume of our journal should be considered one of the first interdisciplinary studies of visual representations of nudity, sex, and sexual behaviour in the Middle East, most notably Iran and its neighbouring countries.

The primary ideas and the intellectual substance of this double special issue are the result of a number of academic activities, including seminars, lectures and conference panels, and also a photography exhibition that I organized in 2018.

These include, 'Beauty and the beast: photography, the body and sexual discourse in the Middle East and Central Eurasia', a panel that I organized on the occasion of Art, Materiality and Representation, an international conference held by the Royal Anthropological Institute which at the British Museum on 3 June 2018. The first three articles of our special issue are the result of papers presented by authors during this highly attended panel.

'Nudity in Iranian photography: from the Qajar era to today' was another panel that I organized during the Twelfth Iranian Studies Conference, which was held at the University of California, Irvine on 16 August 2018. The fourth main article of our special issue, as well as several contributions by myself, are the results of papers presented in this unique and ground-breaking panel in the history of Iranian Studies.

The rest of my contributions in this special issue are supported by a photography exhibition, *Unveiling the Veiled: Royal Consorts, Slaves and Prostitutes in Qajar Photographs*, which I curated and organized to be displayed in the McCune Library of the Mosher Alumni House in the University of California, Santa Barbara on 20 October 2018, and a paper entitled 'Photographs as objects of sexual desire in Iran' that I presented in an associated international conference, 'Slavery and Sexual Labour in the Middle East and North Africa'.

Visual depictions of female nudity and women's naked bodies were represented in traditional paintings and small-scale book illustrations of both Turkish and Persian cultures, which have been incorrectly labelled as miniatures since the medieval period. Related scholarship suggests that it was only during the late eighteenth and, mostly, the nineteenth century that visual representations of male nudity and their sexual behaviours with both the same sex and female subjects arrived into the visual corpora of these two cultures, known mostly as Muslim countries. Popular in the majority of cases among male elites, and made for their gaze and visual sexual pleasure, these series of erotic and pornographic illustrations were used as a complement to sexual written narratives in the form of notebooks and manuscripts.

The arrival of photography better facilitated depictions of nudity, sex and sexual affairs, to the extent that after few years it entirely replaced the painting of similar topics. Now, single erotic and pornographic photographs and photograph albums became popular; these could be reproduced more cheaply than paintings and could easily circulate among all levels of society.

My personal observations confirm that nude and, especially, pornographic photography developed in a much more advanced manner in Ottoman Turkey than in Qajar-era Iran. So far, I have not been able to find any photographs taken or produced during the Qajar period which depict scenes of naked men and women beside each other in sexual positions. However, I was able to find several pornographic photographs and photograph albums belonging to Qajar male elites that were produced or photographed in Turkey, in which one can observe related topics. One of the unique examples in this regard is a photograph album belonging to Amir Doust Mohammad Moayer al-Mamalek that is held in the collection of the Kimia Foundation. This album is an exceptional artefact, and may represent the first time that Iranian elites could have access to such pornographic photographs.

A series of intimate photographs was also taken by Naser al-Din Shah himself, along with members of his court, inside the royal harems and palaces. They are being published for the first time in this special issue. One of the important points in this series of Qajar photographs is the role that eunuch African slaves played in such staged compositions, some of which tease them for their sexual handicap: in this series of images the author of the photographs clearly draws our attention to their mutilated bodies. In this series of Naseri court photographs one can also observe an open sexual dialogue between male subjects.

Qajar prostitutes and their working environment is another main subject of our special issue. It is also for the first time that this series of photographs is being published, with the hope of providing a visual platform for those researchers working on this very little-known topic.

Also seeing first-publication in this issue are group photographs of Qajar singer-prostitutes. Unravelling the ambiguity of their social role and performances is a work in progress, but these rare photographs could prove that this group of Qajar performers had multiple tasks.

In the end, we also wanted to bring to the attention of our readers the importance and interconnectedness of Persian erotic literature with related sexual paintings during nineteenth-century Persia. Under the patronage of Naser al-Din Shah many examples of such literature and images were produced, of course only for the gaze of court members. The Fajouriyeh manuscript should be considered as an example of this literature, which was very popular among the Qajar elites.

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Professor Pedram Khosronejad
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