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Guest Columnist: Nancy Micklewright

LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS: PORTRAITS AND SELFIES

AACIG aims to promote Asian arts and culture. It is our honor to have guest columnist Nancy Micklewright share her expertise on photography in Iran in this issue. AACIG encourages art from all Asian regions. Please contact Kevin Hsieh if you are interested in contributing a column for *NAEA News*.

THE BEGINNINGS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN IRAN

After the invention of photography was announced in Europe in 1839, the new technology soon made its way around the globe. In Iran, Nasir al-din Shah, who ruled from 1848 to 1896, brought photography to the Iranian court, setting up training programs and documenting court life during his reign. Iran's engagement with photography extended beyond the court, though, with photo studios in major Iranian cities. Antoin Sevruguin, born in Iran of Russian-Georgian parents, opened studios in Tehran and Tabriz in the 1870s. One of Iran's most successful early commercial photographers, Sevruguin produced diverse work that included studio portraits and court photographs, as well as photographs of archaeological sites, buildings, and landscapes.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN IRAN TODAY

Photography is still an important art form in Iran. In the country's sometimes challenging political circumstances, particularly since the 1979 revolution, photographers have often been limited in what they can show in their work. Though many have left Iran, those who remain have developed working modes that allow them to tell stories and comment on social issues without getting into trouble with the authorities. One of these photographers is Shadifarin (Shadi) Ghadirian (born 1974), who lives in Tehran. Her work engages with the tension

between tradition and modernity—particularly for women—in some cases through a dialogue with the conventions of historic photography in Iran.

TWO IMAGES OF WOMEN IN IRAN, TAKEN MORE THAN A CENTURY APART

Making portraiture more available was a prime motivation for the development of photography. It is not surprising, then, that portraiture remains among the most popular photography genres globally. The relationship between sitter and photographer varies—sometimes the sitter has a voice in how they are presented, and sometimes the photographer is in control. As in painted portraiture, the background, dress, and props tell a great deal about the sitter and demonstrate the photographer's style. Books could indicate learning, a paintbrush could signal an interest in art, or a clock could represent the passing of time.

Looking at the two photographs here, one by the 19th-century photographer Sevruguin and one by Ghadirian, how do the photographers use the conventions of photographic portraiture? What do you think about the differences in how the subject interacts with the viewer? Why does Ghadirian include the newspaper in her photograph, and why does she pose her sitter in such an old-fashioned setting?

IS A SELFIE A PORTRAIT?

Photographic self-portraits go back to the beginnings of photography, but “selfies” are a phenomenon of the past 3 decades. Now virtually everyone with a cellphone takes selfies to document their lives and to remember specific moments. With the



Figure 1 (left). Antoin Sevruguin, *Untitled*, c. 1870s. Photograph. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Figure 2 (right). Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled*, 1999. Photograph. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

invention of the cellphone camera, what was once available only to the wealthy—the ability to preserve their own image—is now literally in everyone's hands.

Is a selfie a portrait? When you take a selfie, are you thinking about what you are including in the picture to tell others about yourself? Or is it a more ephemeral, spur-of-the-moment image? (How) has the selfie changed the portrait? ■

References

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