

DONNA STEIN

THREE PHOTOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRAN*

Photography has a relatively short history; it has only been about a hundred and fifty years since its discovery and only in the past twenty years that some perspective has been placed on the enormous influence the photographic image has had on thought, communication, art, information exchange between societies, and understanding of world culture. Particularly in the United States and Europe, major efforts have been made through exhibitions and books to uncover the past by reading old photographs. One peculiarity of historical photography is that, although it is obviously possible to make many prints from one negative, contrary to expectation the great collections of amateur photographers often consist of single examples. Consequently the dissemination of the information they contain is limited and often difficult to study.

Photographs are of immense iconographic and documentary value for the study of nineteenth-century Persian history and succinctly elucidate the hierarchical establishment of the Qajar state. In addition, they are an essential tool for the systematic investigation of archaeology, geography, geology, and natural history. Photographs are an unrivaled testament to a traditional way of life and its architectural setting. They satisfied the fantasies of nineteenth-century armchair travelers because, as visual specimens of a passing era, they could convey information about any aspect of everyday life, real and romantic: places, buildings, costumes, monuments, customs, landscapes, and people. They could both propagate and dispel the myths of the Orient.

Photographers in Iran can be divided into three broad categories: those belonging to the European documentary and geographic tradition and recorded

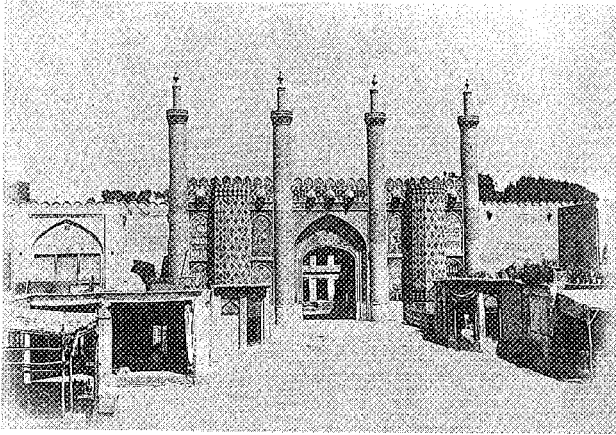
cultural and physical phenomena throughout the world; those who experimented with the new technical discoveries without any particular mission; and those who discovered that they could earn their livelihood from images. I will examine one photographer from each category.

The first published account of the introduction of photography into Iran dates from 1863-64 and was written by the court chronicler, I'timad al-Saltana (Sani al-Dawla).¹ He identifies the earliest practitioners of photography in Persia as Europeans from France, Austria, and Italy. They were instructors at Dar al-Funun, the well-known Tehran polytechnic established by Nasr al-Din Shah in 1850 to train officers, civil and military engineers, doctors, and interpreters. According to I'timad al-Saltana, the Frenchman Jules Richard (1816-91) pioneered photography in Iran. He came to Persia in 1844, taught French and English at Dar al-Funun, and took the name Mirza Riza Khan after his conversion to Islam. In an excerpt from his diary dated December 5, 1844, Richard refers to his commission to make a daguerreotype on silver plate of Crown Prince Nasr al-Din Mirza at Tabriz:

Two sets of equipment using metal plates have been brought for the Shah [Muhammad Shah]. One is a gift from the Queen of England and the other from the Emperor of Russia [Tsar Nicholas I]. Although the operating instructions have been sent in accompanying leaflets, up to now no single European or Persian has been able to operate them and take pictures. When they realised that this task was within my scope, they approached me and first summoned me to take pictures of the Crown Prince and his sister.²

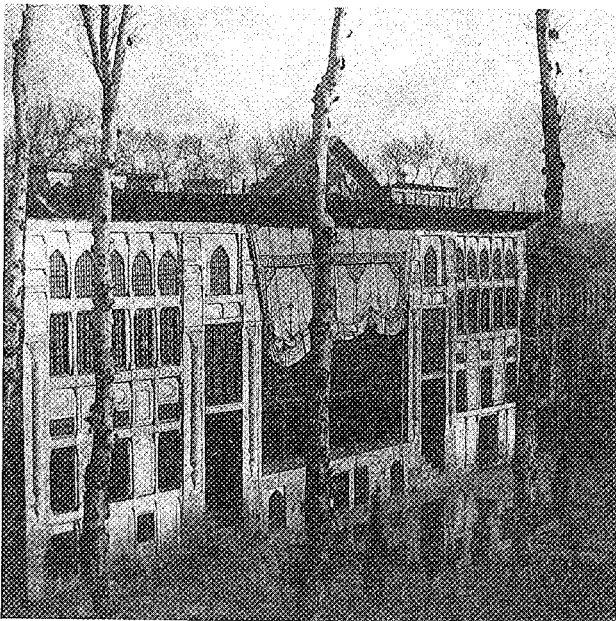
Angelo Piemontese's well-researched and informative article, "The Photograph Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission to Persia (Summer 1862)," published in 1971, mentions the Neapolitan Colonel Luigi Pesce as an avid amateur photographer. Pesce emigrated to Persia in 1848 to become commander-in-

* This paper was originally a lecture given at the symposium, "The Art and Culture of Qajar Iran" supported by a grant from the Hagop Kevorkian Fund and held on April 4, 1987, at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York.



1. Luigi Montabone. *South Gate of the Arg, Tehran*. From the album "Ricordi del viaggio in Persia della missione italiana 1862," 1862. Albumen print. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. Venice, Foto Toso.

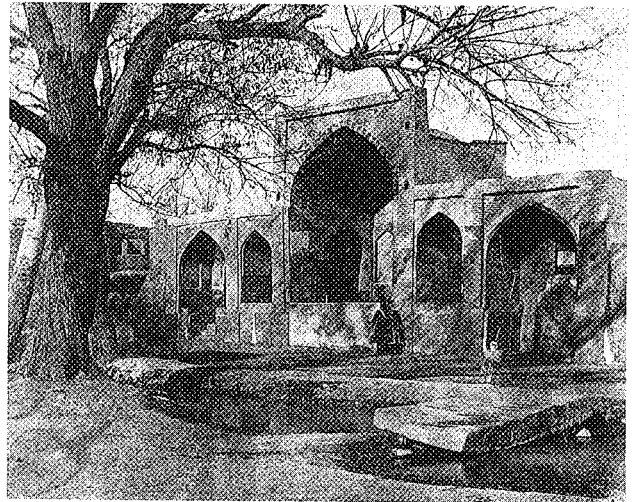
chief of the Persian infantry. In March 1861, he wrote to Count Cavour, asking to be re-posted back to Italy, and indicating he had prepared "an album of Persia's most interesting monuments unrecorded in photography by anyone hitherto and which the petitioner was the first to have the chance to photograph or con-



2. Luigi Pesce. *Golestan Palace of the Shah*. Salt print. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Charles Wilkinson, 1977 (1977.683).

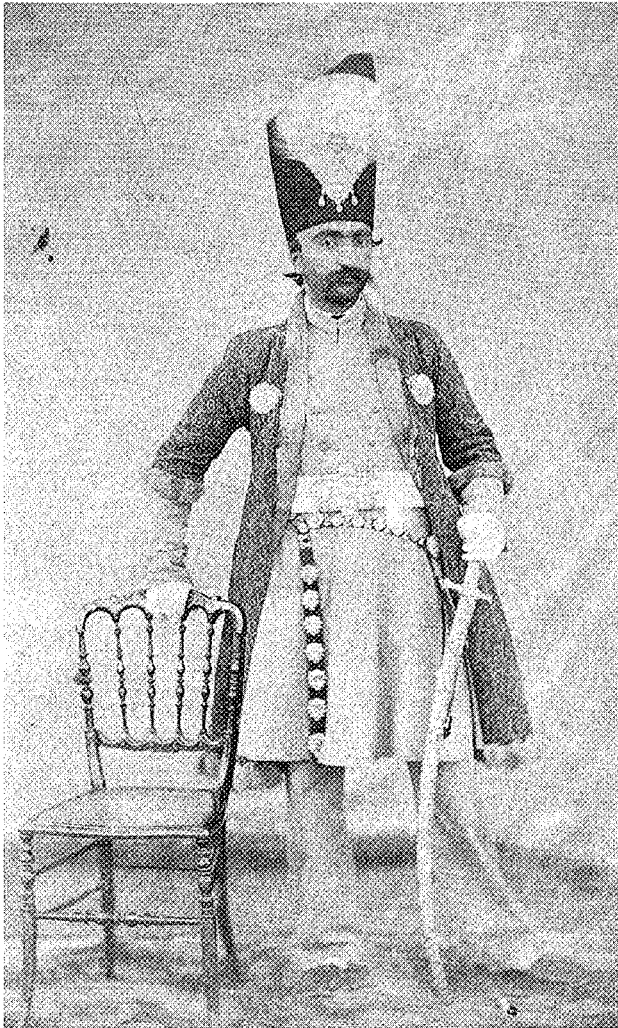
ceive of so doing."³ In January of the same year, Pesce sent another copy of the album to William I of Prussia.

These two albums by Pesce, comprising the earliest documented photographs of Persia, were presumed by Piemontese to have been lost. However, in 1981 an album containing fifty photographs annotated with elegantly written titles in Italian turned up in a private collection in Rome and was auctioned at Sotheby's in London. Described as "50 calotypes of Tehran, recording buildings, vistas, gardens and streets of the city" and dated 1857, this album may be the very one Pesce sent to Count Cavour. A second album, possibly the one sent to William I of Prussia, containing 75 sepia-toned salt and albumen prints (more than a third of which are signed on the negative by Pesce), was given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1977. This



3. Luigi Pesce. *Tomb of Nadir Shah*. Albumen print. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Charles Wilkinson, 1977 (1977.683).

album was originally the property of Ardeshir Mirza, a grandson of Fath 'Ali Shah and governor of Arabistan, Luristan, and Bakhtiaristan. His ownership is derived from an inscription on a painting executed in 1850-51 by Abu'l Hassan Khan Ghaffari (ca. 1814-66), Sani' al-Mulk (Artist of the Kingdom), which is reproduced in the album. Charles Wilkinson, the donor of the Metropolitan album, correctly assumed that Pesce was one of several other as yet unidentified photographers whose work was represented in that volume.



4. Unknown photographer. *Portrait of Nasr al-Din Shah*, ca. 1852-55. Salt print. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Charles Wilkinson, 1977 (1977.683).

The technical limitations of early photography made architecture an appealing subject. Among the photographs signed by Pesce and contained in both the Italian and the Metropolitan album are *The South Gate of the Arg*, one of twelve Tehran city gates, now demolished. Pesce approached his subject straight on. The images are centered and the cast shadows are short, indicating he photographed around midday when the sun was high. Because of the long exposures, the sky is devoid of clouds or any tonal differentiation. The Turin photographer Luigi Montabone photo-



5. Luigi Montabone. *Nasr al-Din Shah at the Royal Villa, Niavaran*. From the album, "Ricordi del viaggio in Persia della missione italiana 1862." 1862. Albumen print. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, Foto Toso.

graphed the same gate with clarity and breadth (fig. 1) a few years later in 1862. Montabone shrewdly made the fullest use of perspective. He photographed from a frontal elevation without exaggeration and distortion and captures the factual as well as the experiential aspects of this monument. For *The Government Gate (Dowlat)*, Pesce diagonally aligns the foreground objects with the furthest extension of the gateway structure. The play of light and shadow helps the eye move back in space as does the shaded archway, which pulls the eye into the background plane.

Pesce also photographed *The Golestan Palace of the Shah* (fig. 2), the principal royal residence in Tehran. In several of his prints, Pesce displays a special sensitivity to the landscape and effectively incorporates trees and foliage into the structure of his compositions. Here the



6. Nasr al-Din Shah. *Self-Portrait*. 1865-66. Albumen print. Reproduced in B. Atabai, *Fihrist-i Album'ha-yi Kitabkhanah-i Sallanati*, Tehran, 2537 (1978).

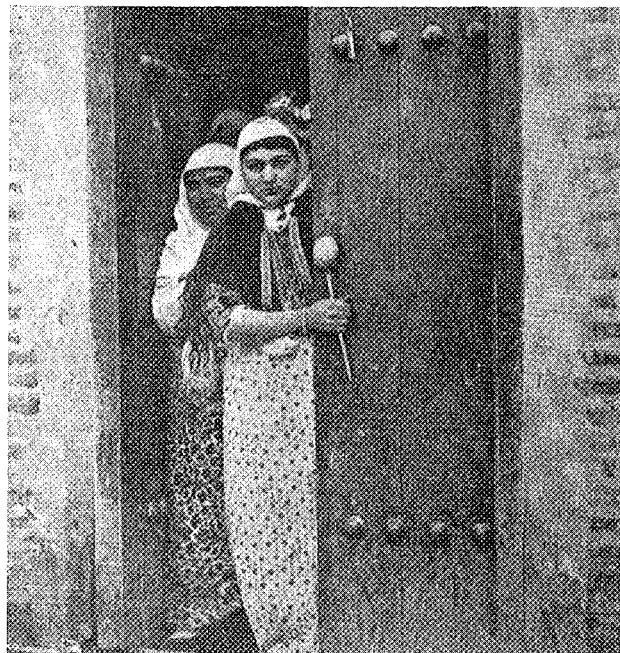


7. Nasr al-Din Shah. *Portrait of the Shah's Mother*. After 1873. Albumen print. Reproduced in B. Atabai, *Fihrist-i Album'ha-yi Kitabkhanah-i Sallanati*, Tehran 2537 (1978).

spacing of the tree trunks across the frontal plane contrasts with the arched windows of the palace in the background. Pesce photographed the renowned *Peacock Throne of the Sun* (ca. 1820) as if it were lit from behind. The frontal treatment and massing of forms through the play of light and dark create a tight geometric composition. *The Tomb of Nadir Shah* (fig. 3) is a particularly beautiful and dramatic image because of the play of light across the iwans and the intertwined network of tree trunks and lacy branches against the sky. In addition, a series of romantic photographs by Pesce reveal famous archaeological ruins at Persepolis, Naqshi-

Rustam in southwest Iran near Shiraz, and Taq-i Bustan near Kermanshah on the central western border.

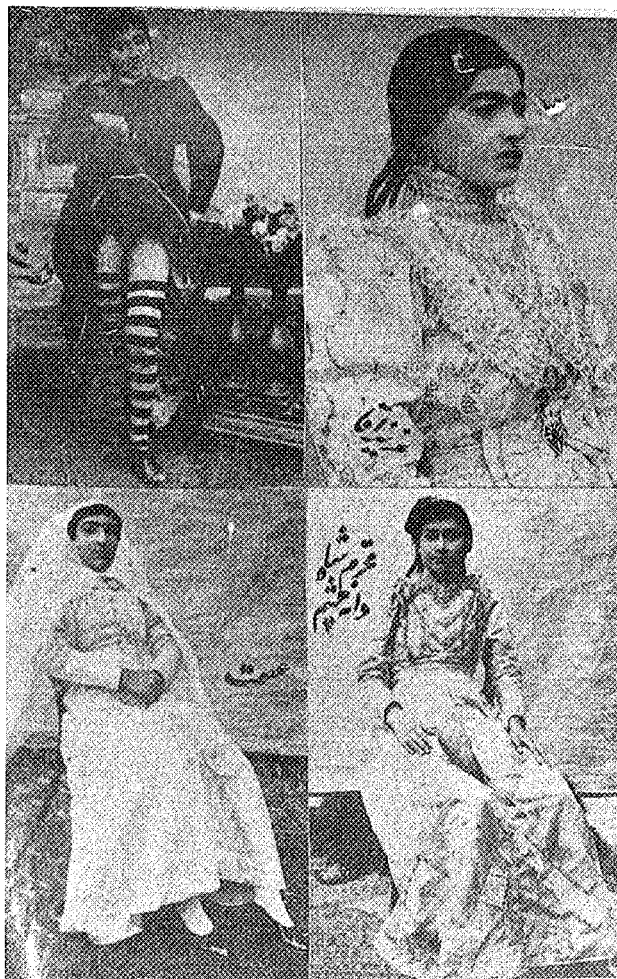
The most famous of the native Persian photographers was Nasr al-Din Shah himself. Photography was one of his favorite pastimes, and part of the royal buildings became known as the *akkashāna*, the abode of photography.⁴ It was because of the Shah's enthusiasm that photography was introduced into the curriculum of Dar al-Funun College after 1860. Though the photographer is unknown, an early formal portrait of *The Young Shah* (fig. 4), dating from between 1852 and 1855,



8. Nasr al-Din Shah. *The Shah's Favorite Concubines*. ca. 1890. Albumen print. Reproduced in B. Atabai, *Fihrist-i Album'ha-yi Kitabkhanah-i Saltanati*, Tehran, 2537 (1978).

when he was about twenty years old, is of particular interest, because it combines Western and Persian elements. He is wearing a traditional *termeh* coat (native weaving from Kerman), lined with Russian fur. He holds a curved Iranian sword, and wears an astrakhan hat typical of the early Qajar dynasty, decorated with the *jagheh*, a paisley-shaped insignia associated with the shah. His suit seems to be styled on a European military uniform, perhaps from Austria, and he leans on an imported spindle side chair for support. His eyes meet the camera directly, in contrast to later portraits where his gaze is averted.

By 1860, photography took over the role of portraiture. Filippo de Filippi, the chronicler of the 1862 Italian mission, remarked upon Nasr al-Din Shah's enthusiasm for photography: "When it was the turn of Signor Montabone to meet the Shah, the Shah, hearing that he was a distinguished photographer, expressed the wish to see his work and to pose himself for a photograph."⁵ *Portrait of Nasr al-Din Shah* by Luigi Montabone (fig. 5) from the album *Ricordi del viaggio in Persia della missione italiana 1862* was the result of his wish.



9. Nasr al-Din Shah. *The Shah's Concubines*. Albumen print. Private collection, Tehran.

The Shah's genuine desire to develop the photographic medium in Persia inspired his courtiers to take up the art. Some of the talented students at Dar al-Funun were sent to Europe to refine their technical skills and artistic understanding. Cameras were placed at the disposal of favored courtiers, who were familiar with the photographic techniques and who accompanied the Shah on excursions inside and outside the country. Many of them were honored with special titles, such as "court photographer" or "professional photographer."

Nasr al-Din Shah's own photographs exhibit an intimacy and knowledge of his subjects, which are lacking in the work of his courtiers. Among his earliest

photographs are a *Self Portrait* (fig. 6), dated 1865-66, and a frontal portrait of his mother, the famous Mahd-i Ulya (fig. 7). Both images have clipped corners because of the plate-holder design. The Shah portrays himself in the idealized studio style of the French photographer Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820-1910). His clothes are sober, reflecting contemporary European tailoring. An inscription states that "the picture was taken in the first 10 days of the month of Ramazan 1284, Tehran. I took this picture myself." The Shah's mother is shown seated on an ornate chair, her hands clasped and modestly dressed in all her finery with emphasis on the lavish material textures and precise disposition of draperies. Her clothes were inspired by European dance costumes (the *zirjourneh* imitates the tutu of ballet dancers), which indicates that it was probably taken after 1873, the date of the Shah's first trip to Europe.



10. Unknown photographer. *Prostitute*. Albumen print. Private collection, Tehran.

Nasr al-Din Shah had a great passion for women, which found expression in the large number of his wives (eighty-five of his wives survived him) and his populous harem, which probably had close to 1,600 persons—all the women and children as well as employees and eunuchs.⁶ Because men were not allowed into the harem, the photographing of women was almost impossible. Only the Shah himself could take pictures of the members of his seraglio. The photographs Nasr al-Din Shah took there are the earliest portrait photographs of Iranian women extant.



11. Unknown photographer. *The Photographer*. ca. 1895. Albumen print. Reproduced in B. Atabai, *Fihrist-i Album'ha-yi Kitabkhanah-i Sultani*, Tehran, 2537 (1978).

Another photograph definitely attributable to Nasr al-Din Shah is of two women peering out from behind a doorway, entitled *The Shah's Favorite Concubines* (fig. 8). The inscription in the Shah's own handwriting suggests that the girls—two sisters—were his favorites in the last years of his life. It was taken on the 8th of Shaban which corresponds to March 30, 1890. On another photograph of the same date and showing the same subjects, the Shah wrote: "These two photographs I took with the instant photographic apparatus which I brought from Europe. It was eight days after Nowruz, the Year of The Leopard. I was feeling most depressed and ill and bad-tempered."⁷ Nasr al-Din Shah is probably referring to his third trip to Europe in 1889.

Among the Shah's production are a group of photographs showing women from the imperial harem,



12. Antoine Sevruguin. *The Sevruguin Family*. Albumen print from glass-plate negative. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



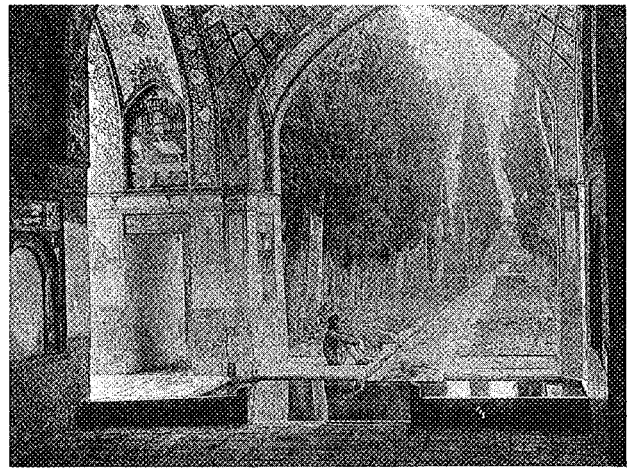
13. Antoine Sevruguin. *Nasr al-Din Shah in front of the Peacock Throne*. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Jay Bisno.

often in bold and lascivious poses (fig. 9). The name of each concubine is written on them in the Shah's hand. In one from this series, the girl on the bottom right is called "Doneyyehchesma," which literally means "pupil of the eye," that is, something very dear to the Shah's heart.

As Iran was opened up to the Western world it was subjected to new morals and ideas that were reflected in new attitudes toward sexuality. Western curiosity about the secrets of the harem created an excellent market for photographs. A photograph simply entitled *Harem* is a typical, unidealized depiction of harem women. Prostitution, although forbidden by the Quran, was practiced freely. In another photograph, a woman prostitute boldly looks out at the camera as she reclines. A poustin is in the center foreground (fig. 10).

Nasr al-Din Shah used glass-plate negatives, and he was familiar with the chemical recipes and step-by-step procedures for printing and developing photographs, including the collodion process, albumen and salt papers, cyanotype printing, and gold toning to make a photograph permanent. He owned various cameras, although he appears most of the time to have used a large-format view camera secured on a tripod.

The Photographer (fig. 11), by one of the Shah's courtiers, is reminiscent of Victorian studio portraits by Nadar or Carjat. The model, who holds a lens cap, is posed with great artifice in front of an elaborate backdrop. Masonry studio props and a rug create the ambiance. The photographer appears short in relation to the size of what seems to be a full-plate outdoor-view camera, which is also used as a prop. The tripod is a late-nineteenth-century portable and collapsible type, common in the 1890's.



14. Probably Antoine Sevruguin. *Royal Palace: Bagh-i Fin, Kashan*. Albumen print. Private collection, Tehran.

The most prominent and prolific commercial photographer in Iran at the end of the nineteenth century was Antoine Sevruguin, an Armenian who was popularly known as Anton Khan. He operated a commercial studio on Khiaban-e-Dowlat (Avenue of the Ambassadors) in Tehran and was active from the 1870's until about 1920.⁸ Sevruguin's images are numbered on the negatives with titles in French, handwritten in pencil on the verso identifying the subjects. Some prints are embossed or ink-stamped with his



15. Probably Antonine Sevruguin. *Women and Children Picnic in a Persian Park*. Albumen print. Private Collection, Tehran.

name. Apparently he wrote a treatise on photography for Muzaffar al-Din Shah in 1878, when he was in Tabriz.⁹

Sevruguin recorded his surroundings with an encyclopedic eye. He was an omnipresent witness and traveled throughout the country from Ardebil to Mashhad, from Tehran to Yazd, and photographed people, landscapes, architecture, and objects with equal facility. His photographs are widely reproduced in travel books and narratives, although they are often not labeled as his production. Sevruguin has been variously identified in the literature as “Serunian,” “Segruvian,” “Sevriogin,” “A. Sevrugin,” “Messrs Sevrogine of Tehran,” and “M. Sevruguine of Tehran.” The glass negative in the Freer Collection of *The Sevruguin Family* (fig. 12) shows the photographer’s two daughters in Western-style dress prominently

displaying Christian crosses, which establishes the family’s Russian-Armenian heritage.

Sevruguin’s position in the Qajar court is unknown, but he obviously enjoyed royal patronage as evidenced by his portrait, *Nasr al-Din Shah in front of the Peacock Throne* (fig. 13), and had access to the Shah and his courtiers in various informal settings. In *Royal Palace, Bagh-i Fin, Kashan* (fig. 14), he posed a man seated in the central plane and thereby enhanced the sweeping thrust into the background and achieved a greater depth of field. The photographer uses the same compositional convention in *Women and Children Picnicking in a Persian Park* (fig. 15).

For his portraits, Sevruguin effectively poses his subjects against a neutral background. His study of *Two Women Wearing Chador* (fig. 16) is particularly mysterious because of the boldness with which the



16. Probably Antoine Scvruguin. *Two Women Wearing Chador with Roubandeh*. Albumen print. Private collection, Tehran.



17. Probably Antoine Sevruguin. *Man with Falcon*. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Jay Bisno.



18. Probably Antoine Sevruguin. *A Young Dervish Holding a Tabar*. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Jay Bisno.

younger women lifts her *roubandeh* and peers at the photographer. He also selects interesting looking people such as *Man with Falcon* and *Dervish* (figs. 17, 19) and engages their gaze. The costumes of dervishes were symbolic: the black outer garment symbolized the grave; a tall hat the headstone; white undergarments, resurrection. A dervish could be a holy man, or a scholar-teacher, or a healer, or a wandering beggar who had devoutly given up the world. Thieves and charlatans often pretended to be dervishes, playing the role of pious men to take money from the faithful.¹⁰ *Young Dervish Holding a Tabar* (fig. 18) is a romantic image of a youth holding a ceremonial axe (*tabar*) in bronze and gold inlay from the Safavid period.

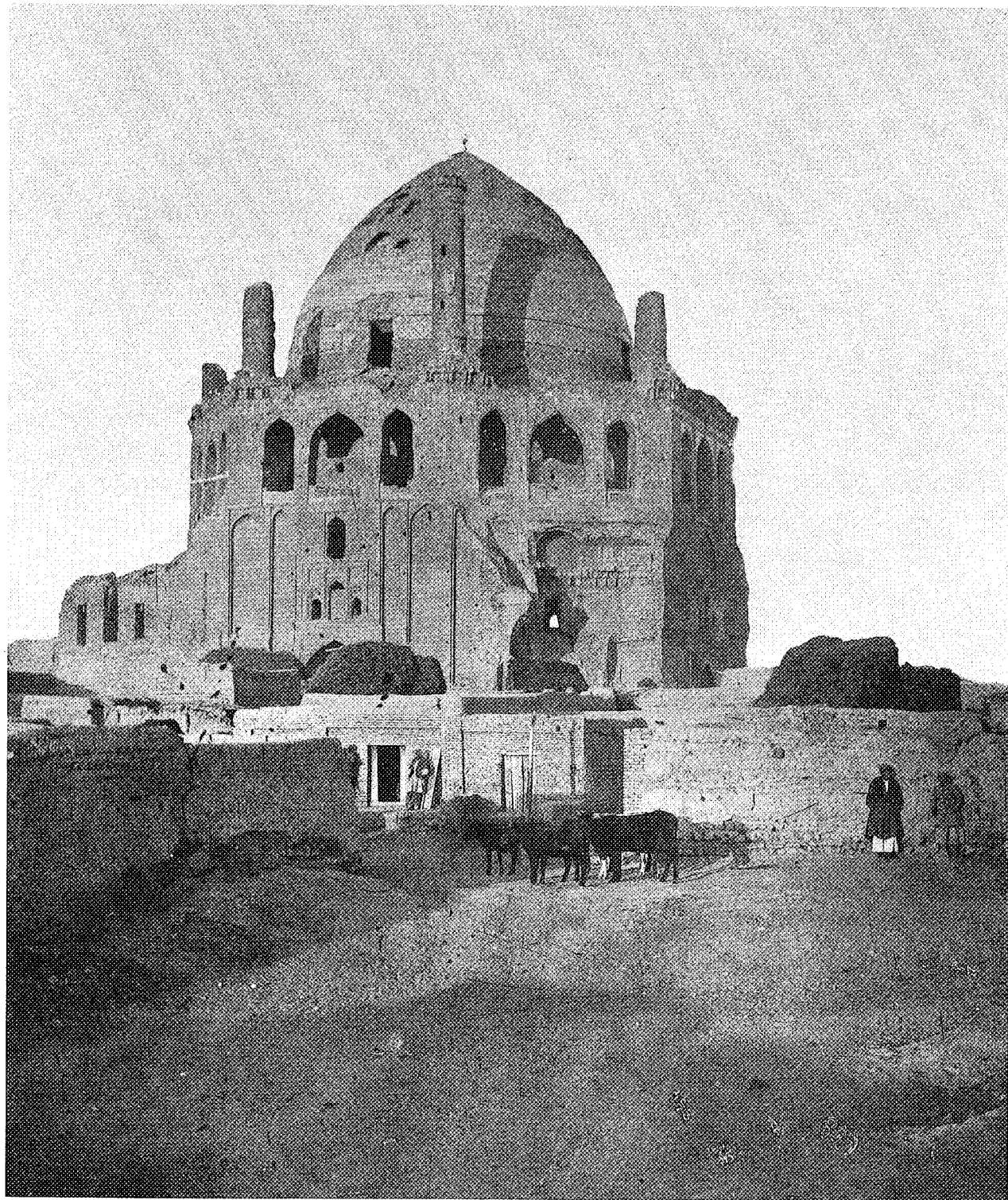
Sevruguin paid careful attention to the changing quality of light, and most of his photographs appear to be taken around midday when the sun is high and the

cast shadows are short. He often places a figure or groups of people in his pictures to determine scale and monumentality. Sevruguin's depiction of Uljaitu's tomb at Sultaniyya (fig. 20) is widely reproduced in the literature and apparently was a very popular subject. The Pesce and Montabone pictures of this monument (figs. 21-22) were taken from a frontal elevation, but Sevruguin has moved his camera to an oblique angle, which suggests more of the building's three-dimensionality. Even when there are no people available, Sevruguin always uses a prop, such as the camera and tripod in the shots of the *Main Gate*, *Bull Colossus*, *Persepolis* (fig. 23); that particular prop also indicates that he owned and used more than one camera.

Sevruguin's dramatic view, *Blue Mosque, Tabriz* (fig. 24), documents in what a poor state of repair the



19. Probably Antoine Sevruguin. *Dervish*. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Jay Bisno.



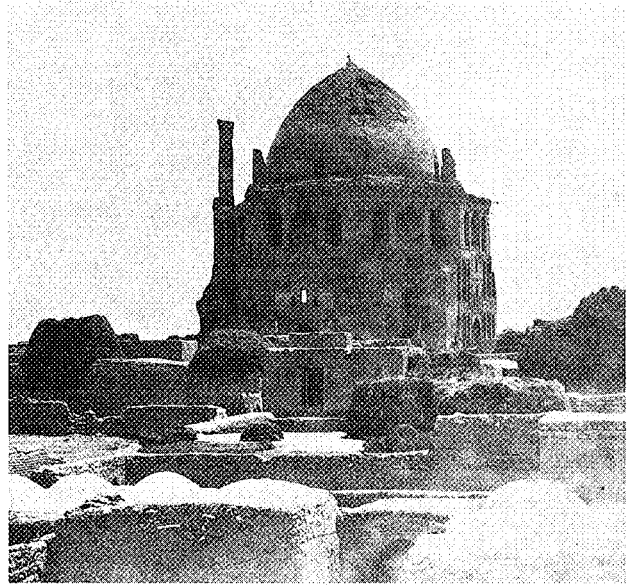
20. Antoine Sevruguin. *Mausoleum of Uljayu, Sultaniyya*. Albumen print from glass-plate negative. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



21. Probably Luigi Pesce. *Mausoleum of Uljaitu, Sultaniyya*. Albumen print. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Charles Wilkinson, 1977 (1977.683).

building complex was. From the standpoint of photography, he treats the architecture as freestanding sculpture, using the late-afternoon shadows to clothe areas of the walls in mystery and reveal the elaborate detail in other sections. The image is carefully centered and cropped to produce a strongly geometric formal composition. The image is complete. Nothing extends beyond the borders of the picture frame, so everything that is of interest to the viewer, were he at the site himself, is present. In contrast, Montabone's photographs of the same subject (fig. 25) show different iwans and suggest that the building was more complete in 1862. Sevruguin's photograph of *Taq-i Bustan* (fig. 26) is extremely interesting, for it includes a small pavilion which is no longer extant. The diagonal sweep and the use of light and shade to define the structural outline and illuminate detail give Sevruguin's image a certain theatricality.

Mirza Reza Kermani (fig. 27) was the deranged fanatic who assassinated Nasr al-Din Shah in 1896. He was executed for it the following August 12. The long shadows in the foreground of the photographer and his assistant who took the picture of it indicate a late-afternoon hanging (fig. 28). (Another method of execution was burying a person alive). *Persian School: Bastinado for an Unruly Pupil* (fig. 29) shows a much less severe punishment, the bastinado, in which the feet of the culprit were whipped with tree branches.



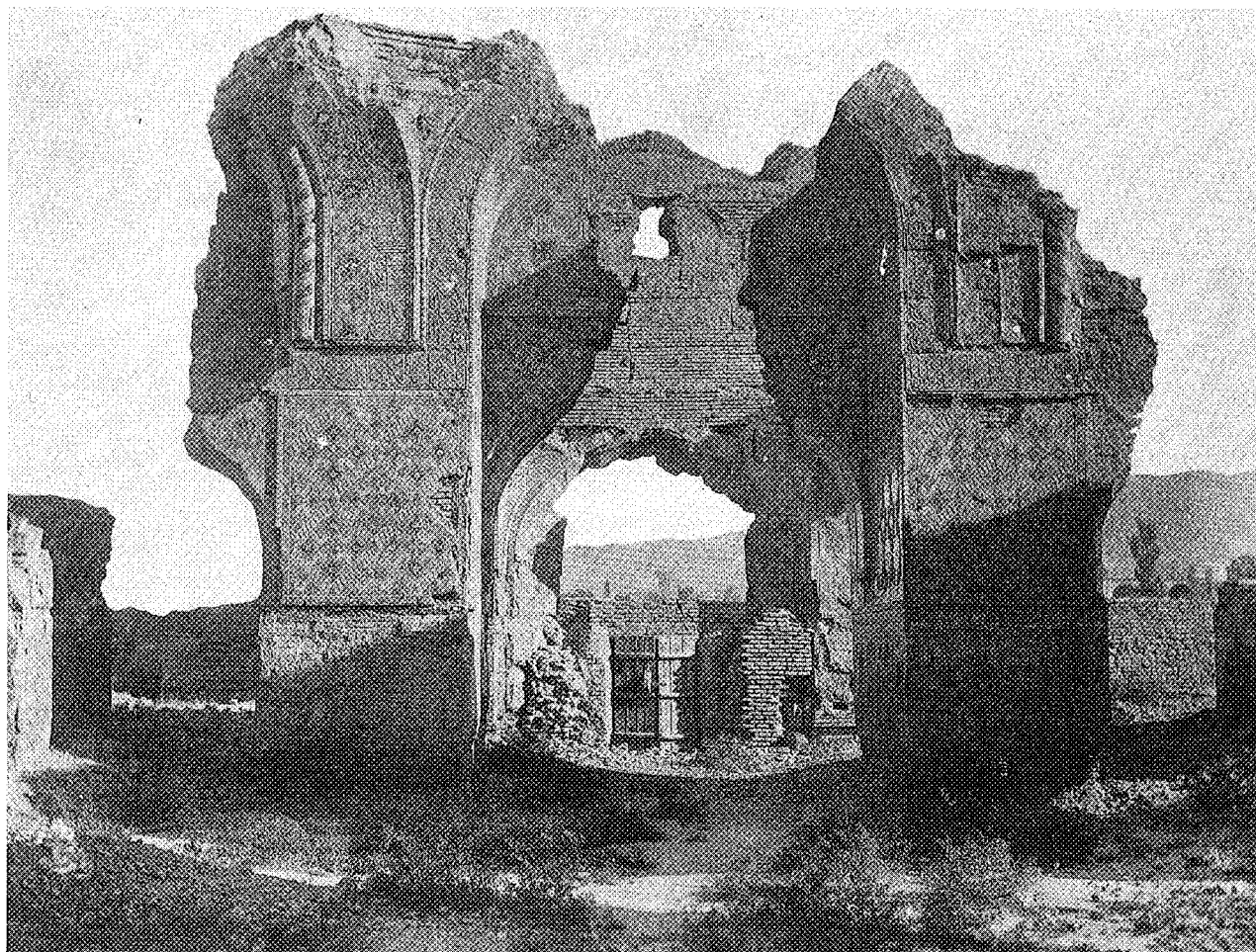
22. Luigi Montabone. *Mausoleum of Uljaitu, Sultaniyya*. From the album "Ricordi del viaggio in Persia della missione italiana 1862," 1862. Albumen print. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, Foto Toso.

The first European photographers based their work on the formal and aesthetic rules of painting. Photographers in Persia did not have the same naturalistic pictorial tradition to rely on for inspiration, and were forced to investigate Western European prototypes. The accelerated importation of Western models, such as prints, clothing, and artifacts under Nasr al-Din Shah, but begun under his two predecessors in the early years of the nineteenth century, coincided with a period of constant communication with European powers and a long procession of European travelers visiting the exotic Orient. Topographical photography by adventurous travelers in Persia was quite common by the end of the century. With the invention of the hand-held Kodak camera in 1888, even the wife of a European resident building roads and bridges could be an enthusiastic photographer.¹¹ In describing the life and times of the Qajar period, the literature shows late-nineteenth-century Persia to be at a point of transition, a traditional society adapting to Western ideas and technology. Nineteenth-century Persian photographs enable us to picture what old Persia was really like for itself and others.

Los Angeles, California



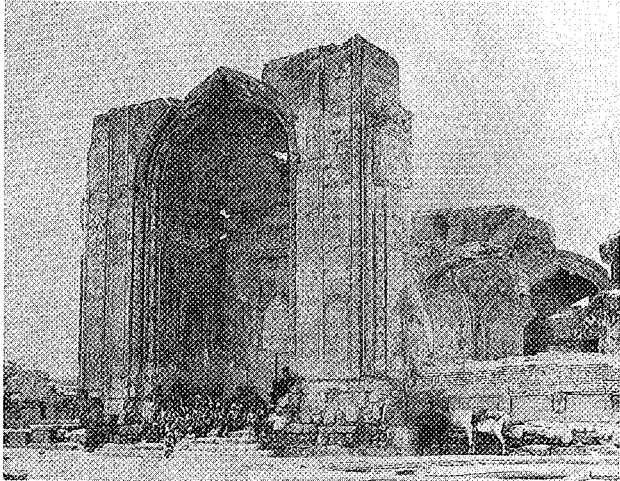
23. Antoine Sevruguin. *Colossal Bull, Main Gate, Persepolis*. Albumen print from glass-plate negative. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



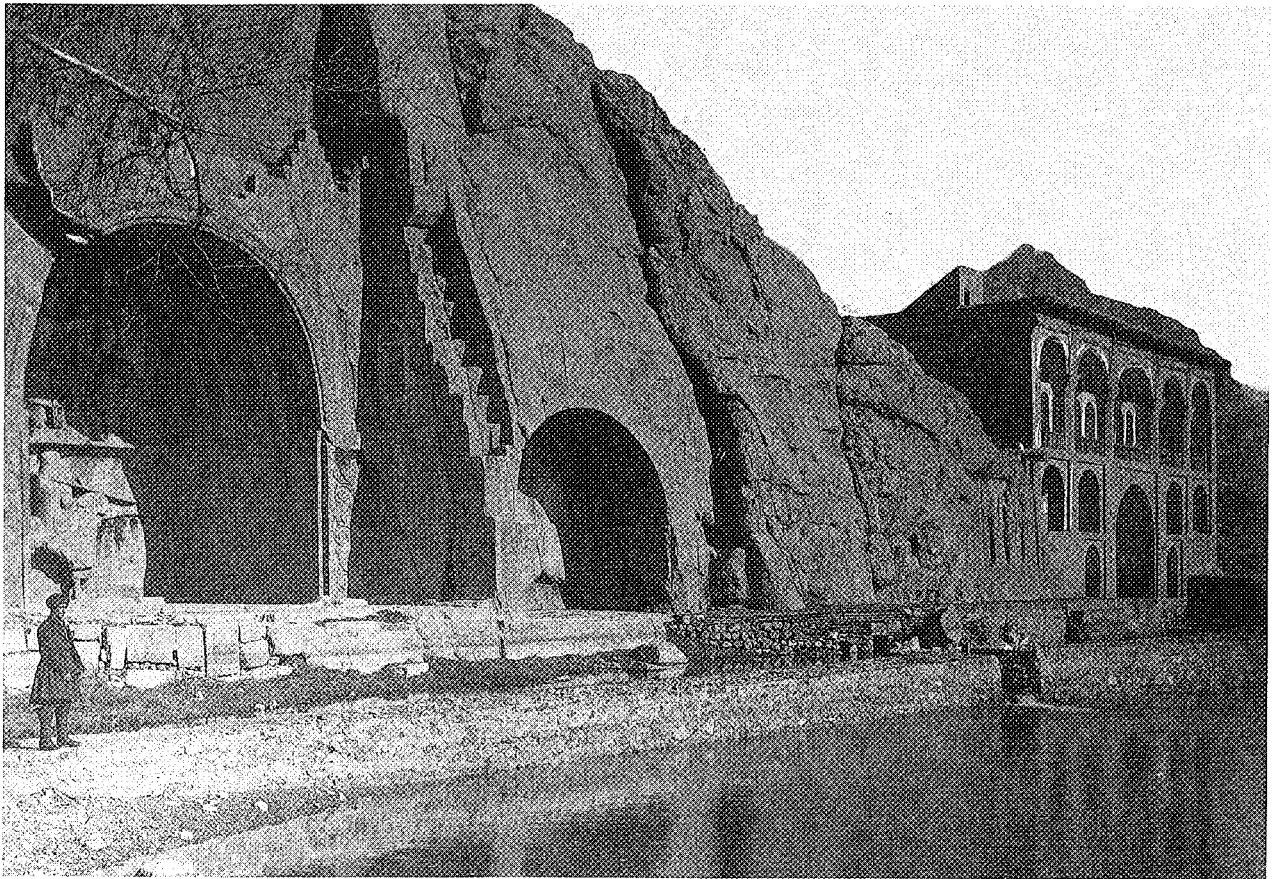
24. Antoine Sevruguin. *Blue Mosque, Tabriz*. ca. 1900. Albumen print from glass-plate negative. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

NOTES

1. Iraj Afshar, "Some Remarks on the Early History of Photography in Iran," *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change, 1800-1925* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 261.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 262.
3. Angelo Piemontese, "The Photography Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission to Persia (Summer 1882)," *East and West*, N.S. 22, nos. 3-4 (September-December 1972): 262.
4. Afshar, "Remarks on Photography in Iran," p. 265.
5. Piemontese, "Album of the Italian Diplomatic Mission," p. 290.
6. E. Yarshater, "Observations on Nasir al-Din Shah," *Qajar Iran: Political, Social, and Cultural Change, 1800-1925* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 8.
7. Afshar, "Remarks on Photography in Iran," p. 275.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Louis Vaczek and Gail Buckland, *Travelers in Ancient Lands: A Portrait of the Middle East, 1839-1919* (Boston, 1981), p. 23.
11. Ella Rebe Durand, *An Autumn Tour in Western Persia* (Westminster, 1902), p. 131.



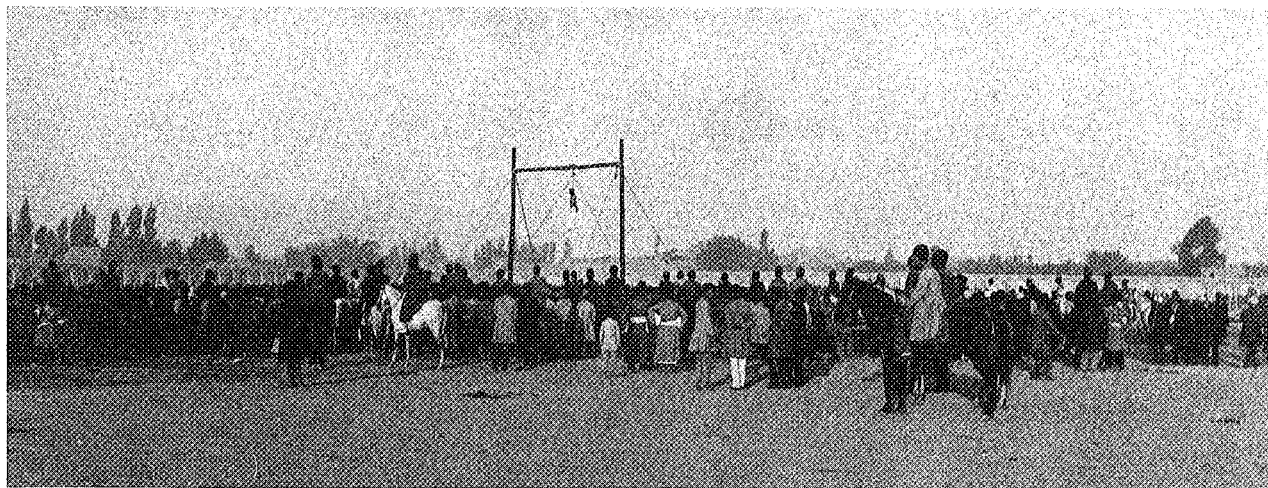
25. Luigi Montabone. *Blue Mosque, Tabriz*. From the album "Ricordi del viaggio in Persia della missione italiana 1862," 1862. Albumen print. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, Foto Toso.



26. Antoine Sevruguin. *Taq-i Bustam, Kermanshah*. Albumen print from glass-plate negative. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



27. Probably Antoine Sevruguin. *Mirza Reza Kermani, Assassin of Nasr al-Din Shah*. 1896. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Jay Bisno.



28. Antoine Sevruguin. *Execution of Assassin of Nasr al-Din Shah*. August 12, 1896. Albumen print. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., gift of Jay Bisno.



29. Probably Antoine Sevruguin. *Persian School: Bastinado for an Unruly Pupil*. Albumen print. Private Collection, Tehran.