

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 15, 2017

Ali Behdad, *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 224 pp., \$30.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780226356402.

There now exist roughly three waves of scholarship on Orientalism and visual culture. A first, catalyzed by Linda Nochlin's groundbreaking 1983 essay "The Imaginary Orient,"¹ registered the oppressive and colonialist dimensions of European Orientalist representations of the Middle East. A second embraced the notion of indigenous counter-discourse, as represented by Zeynep Çelik's "Speaking Back to Orientalist Discourse" (2000), which focused on the corrective efforts of Ottoman cultural producers to counter such Orientalist framings.² Ali Behdad's *Camera Orientalis* is part of a recent, third wave that rejects the designation of cultural artifacts as *either* European-Orientalist oppression *or* anti-colonial resistance, and instead seeks to forge new analytical frameworks through which to understand histories of artistic production in the modern Middle East. Take an image like the 1865 self-portrait of the Qajar ruler Nasir al-Din Shah, for example, which was captioned by its monarch-author as "this is a photograph of me that I took." The portrait activates a dizzying loop of photographic and textual self-referentiality, culturally- and historically-bound visions of authority, and the politics of a new technology in late-nineteenth-century Iran. How can we begin to understand such an object?

Behdad pursues this methodological inquiry through the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century photography with a particular focus on the Ottoman Empire and Qajara Iran. Its five chapters include useful primers on the historical conditions, theoretical issues, and collecting practices that have defined the notion of "Orientalist photography" since the nineteenth century (Chapters One and Two). It also encompasses a consideration of the troubled position of the "resident" or "indigenous" photographer in the Middle East, as exemplified by the Tehran-based Armenian-Russian photographer Antoin Sevruguin (Chapter Three); two sections on the question of photographic self-representation and imperial power in portrait photography (Chapters Four and Five); and a critical Afterword on the subject of neo-Orientalism and contemporary art. The text is complemented by eighty high-quality reproductions of photographs in personal collections, the Golestan Palace Photographic Archive, the Smithsonian, the Getty Research Institute, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. These previously little-seen images take part in a dynamic

¹ Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," *Art in America* (May 1983), 118-131, 187-191.

² Zeynep Çelik, "Speaking Back to Orientalist Discourse," in *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930*, Holly Edwards, ed. (Princeton, N.J., 2000), 77-97.

visual conversation that both substantiates Behdad's analysis and provides rich material for the reader's own.

Though its chapters can be read discretely, Behdad returns in each to the larger methodological concerns that define the book as a whole. His intervention has two parts: the author both counterposes the formal categories of Art History with a more ecumenical understanding of visual culture, and tweaks earlier postcolonial approaches by analyzing the networks of social relationships that produced cultural representations of the modern Middle East. As Behdad explains it, his ultimate goal is to "expose the formalistic silences and to critique the Orientalist tendencies of the conventional art-historical approach, while offering a corrective to postcolonial counterclaims by mapping the various ways in which the Orientalist archive was the product of visual contact between the West and the East, a contact that, though marked by enormously uneven relations of domination and cultural hegemony, did not merely engender a unidirectional gaze" (9). In this methodological impulse, *Camera Orientalis* keeps company with several other important releases of 2015, including *Istanbul Exchanges: Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*,³ *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910*,⁴ and *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary: Reconfiguring the Architectural Past in a Modernizing Empire*.⁵ Behdad's book is explicitly in dialogue with these scholars; together, their collective work of the last several years has helped define visual culture of the modern Middle East as a field of study in its own right.

Behdad's notion of the *camera orientalis*, a term which emphasizes the "centrality of 'the Orient'" in histories of photography, insists on a regional affiliation for the apparatus of the camera (1). The term is a riff on Roland Barthes' seminal *Camera Lucida* (1980), in which the French thinker elaborated his theory of photography and the medium's phenomenology of affect. It is also a reference to *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (1997), anthropologist Christopher Pinney's investigation of the uses of photography beyond the Euro-American circuit, in which the author countered that "what matters is not the personal and private readings of the analyst but photography's impact on the everyday life of a society." Barthes and Pinney focused their terms on the technology of the camera itself, as an apparatus marked by its ability to prismatically focus light (*camera lucida*), or to indexically record reality (*camera indica*). Behdad modifies our understanding of the camera in a different way, by accentuating a geographic, rather than technological, dimension of the camera. This is a generative gesture, which raises a series of interrelated questions throughout the book, regarding the long-standing historical relationship between the "Orient," imagined and real, and the apparatus of the camera: Does the *camera orientalis* imply particular ways of seeing the world? Are there essential differences between what Behdad dubs "Orientalist photography," "local photography," or "indigenous traditions?" Is it even possible to identify photographic practices "free of the ontological and epistemological distinctions on which Orientalism rests" (134)?

One of the most striking features of the *camera orientalis* as Behdad describes it is the regenerative power it gains through its affiliation with the collection. Chapter Three, for

³ Mary Roberts, *Istanbul Exchanges: Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

⁴ Stephen Sheehi, *Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁵ Ahmet Ersoy, *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary: Reconfiguring the Architectural Past in a Modernizing Empire* (London: Routledge, 2015).

example, focuses on the many uses of Antoin Sevruguin's photographs of Qajar-era Iran as they wended their way to their current home in the Smithsonian Institution's Freer & Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC. As Behdad shows, their presence there, made the images available for use by American political experts responsible for shaping diplomatic relationships between the US and Iran after WWII—as well as making possible his own first encounter with the images in the 1990s. Indeed, one of the most valuable features of *Camera Orientalis* is that it renders transparent the relationship between American collecting institutions and the recent body of scholarship on “Orientalist photography” of which this book is a part. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in Chapter Two, in which Behdad traces the history of the Pierre de Gigord collection, from its creator's initial “love affair” with Turkey in the 1960s through its acquisition by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2008 (68). Behdad led a research seminar centering on the GRI collection soon after its 2008 acquisition and co-edited a series of related essays. (Full disclosure: I participated in the seminar as a graduate student.) By historicizing both the institutional and the personal dimensions of collecting and scholarship (see especially Chapter Four, “In My Grandfather's Darkroom”), Behdad powerfully substantiates his central claim that “what enables Orientalism as a discourse of power is not ideological uniformity nor intentionality but rather unequal relations of production and reception that generate the complex patterns of its political utility” (99).

Camera Orientalis gives new direction to the study of what has previously been known as “Orientalist photography.” Bringing together photographic collections that are often treated in isolation, Behdad roots his analyses in a rich textual archive that encompasses nineteenth-century theories of photography (Théophile Gautier, Gustave Flaubert), post-structuralist analyses (Roland Barthes) and postcolonial thought (Arjun Appadurai, Homi Bhabha, James Clifford), and recent art history (Geoffrey Batchen, Iftikhar Dadi), to name just a few of his touchstones. In so doing, he constructs a framework for understanding images and histories, like Nasir al-Din Shah's 1865 self-portrait, for which no single discipline provides adequate tools. That photograph was simultaneously a representation of the shah's “absolute power,” a query into practices of public and private consumption, and a multi-vocal text bearing contradictory messages (141). Such is the *camera orientalis*, Behdad suggests, and it is only by altering our own established ways of seeing that we can fully understand its images.

Sarah-Neel Smith
Assistant Professor
Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism
Maryland Institute College of Art

© 2017: Sarah-Neel Smith

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Smith, Sarah-Neel, Review of *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on the Photography of the Middle East*, *SCTIW Review*, August 15, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1506>.

ISSN: 2374-9288