Scenes of learning in the Hotz Photograph Collection

When Albert Hotz, in the 1890’s, made photographs of Iran and collected the images taken by other photographers (Ernst Hoeltzer and Antoin Sevruguin, to name but the two most important ones), he had in mind to document the country and its inhabitants as much as possible. It is not surprising that Hotz, being an entrepreneur, would give much attention to indigenous products that might be useful to his activities and advantageous to his commercial interests. Agricultural products (including opium), textiles, minerals, finance, transport and communications, they all might bring him the gains that had brought him to Iran in the first place. But Hotz was much more than a trader with a feeling for documentation. He was an open-minded collector with a wide interest. Landscapes, architecture, people and historical places interested him as much as the commercial potential of the country. This is borne out by the fact that he brought together far more material than he ever could use for his primary goal, his commerce. It can equally be seen from his impressive library and from his extensive reference collection of offprints and ephemeral publications on a great variety of subjects, which made him in course of time a student of the history of Iran and an author on aspects of the history of the relations between Iran and the Netherlands. Finally, it can be seen from his collection of more than 1100 photographs, about two thirds of which are from Iran and neighbouring countries. At a more advanced age he would collect his own life by keeping extensive diaries which provide us with a multitude of details about almost each of his many preoccupations.

If one goes through the twenty albums and boxes with photographs which nowadays constitute the Hotz Collection of Photographs in Leiden University Library, a whole world, thought to have vanished, comes to life again. It is possible with the images in the Hotz collection to evoke an era of over a century ago. The variety of subject matter in the images makes it possible to document even such features Hotz may not have been primarily interested in. One such subject which is only very modestly represented in the collection of Hotz’s photographs is Islamic education and book culture. We do not know much of the extent of Hotz’s knowledge of the Persian language, but to judge from the almost total lack of books in Persian in his library we may, perhaps, conclude that such knowledge was very limited, if he had any command of the written language at all. Nor would Muslim scholarship be a subject that would have greatly interested Hotz. Yet his photographs provide us with some glimpses of that aspect of Iranian life as well.

In the following I will present a short selection of images of traditional learning and education in Iran taken from Hotz’s collection of photographs. A few categories of images may be distinguished. In two albums there are (identical) sets of photographs of the tombs of Sa’di and Hafiz in Shiraz (Hotz album 02:014-16, 18 = Hotz album 09:084-86, 88, and also Hotz album 13:043). These places were, of course, touristic venues, and Hotz has probably documented them for no other reason than just that, not necessarily out of appreciation of Persia’s two greatest literati.

There are several scenes of primary schools, in Isfahan (Hotz album 11:047, 12:012A and Hotz album 12:051B) and Tehran (Hotz album 15:051). They should be seen as scenes of street life, of which the Hotz collection has many more examples, showing beggars, musicians, dervishes, fishermen, servants, soldiers, barbers, craftsmen, traders, or people who are indiscriminately dubbed as ‘natives’ with indication of their place of origin. Generally speaking, the images of these schools show us scenes of a teacher, an assistant teacher and a number of pupils, usually all boys, although the school in Tehran also has female pupils. The teacher is distinguished by his stick, and once also by his narguileh.
The children are sitting in a circle and occupy themselves with exercises in reading and writing. There are also images of adults who are involved in learning, though their number is much more limited. The gentlemen at the entrance of the Takht-e Kawam (Qavam) in Shiraz display their ability with books, although it is not altogether clear to what purpose (Hotz album 02:017 = Hotz album 09:087). The portrait of the Sheikh al-Islam of Isfahan shows a self-confident religious dignitary (Hotz album 11:001). There is also a group portrait of mustawfi’s and mirza’s in Isfahan, some of whom show their secretarial paraphernalia (Hotz album 11:053). The collection also contains two examples of Persian calligraphy (Hotz album 12:059 and 12:063). An interesting display of a book can be observed in the photograph of a reception by the Zarathustrians in Kirman (Hotz album 15:046). There the book is, of course, not Islamic, but serves to prove that the Zarathustrians are people of the book as well, and hence should enjoy protection under treaty with the Muslims, in the same way as the Jews and Christians enjoy that protection.

When looking at the images, which show all there is to be found of this genre in the Hotz photograph collection, one cannot escape the conclusion that the cultural and literary life of Iran in the 1890’s was an area to which Hotz had little or no access, nor had his fellow photographers for that matter. Yet, documentation of this sort is rare in any photo collection, and that the images of learning and the learned are available at all is already a source of satisfaction. The more so if one considers that almost no images of scenes of learning have come to us from inside the circles of traditional Islamic scholarship in Iran.

Sources

• Album 02:017. Shiraz, Takht-i Kawam (Qavam), Mausoleum of the former Governor of Shiraz in the Hafiz cemetery. Photograph by Albert Hotz (1855-1930), platinotype by John Thomson of London, 1890-1891. Album 09:87 is identical. Outside the entrance of the mausoleum one sees a few literate turbaned men sitting and reading from books which lay on book holds of different making. One book is kept open with a penholder used as a paper weight. Would they study there, or would they be sitting there in order to recite by request and sell amulets and talismans to the visitors of the grave?

• Album 12:059. Model of Persian writing. A calligraphic panel. Photograph by Ernst Hoeltzer (1835-1911), Collodion print, c. 1890. The calligrapher shows off his ability in nasta'liq script. The panel, which has an abru background, does not display a running text, but rather shows separate letters, words and phrases, which are sometimes repeated, and by the flawless writing of which the calligrapher shows his craftsmanship. Though the writing is well done, it is evident that the calligrapher has avoided the truly difficult ligatures. In the last line there seems to be the calligrapher’s signature, 'Imad al-Hasani, and a date, 1017 AH (1608-1609 CE).
• Album 11:047. Isfahan, a primary school in the open air. Photograph by Ernst Hoeltzer (1835-1911). Collodion print, c. 1890. In the centre the teacher is standing with an open book in his left hand and the stick with which he disciplines his pupils in his right hand. Another adult, who may be an assistant teacher, is sitting slightly at the back of the teacher. Most of the pupils seem to be under the age of ten. Two children are standing in front of their teacher with open books, apparently posing for the photographer, as does the teacher. The other children are sitting in full circle, mostly with their backs to the camera. Several children are holding open books as well. The pupil sitting nearest the teacher’s right hand ostensibly shows a pen box. Along the wall of the building behind the scene spectators are lined up. They have probably nothing to do with the school. Another photograph of the same school is 12:012A, where the teacher is sitting instead of standing.

• To the right: album 15:051. ‘École à Téhéran’. Albumin print, by Antoin Sevruguin (late 1830’s-1933), made in c. 1890. An open air school in Tehran, with pupils of ten years old or less. All are seated on a carpet and have left their shoes on the ground. The teacher sits at the right, with a simple narguileh in front of him. He has a long twig lying in front of him, by which he can draw the attention of each individual pupil in the circle without having to move himself. His assistant sits at the left. A girl is sitting right next to the teacher. Both reading and writing are being taught.
• Album 12: 051B. Isfahan. Photograph by Ernst Hoeltzer (1835-1911). Collodion print, c. 1890. A primary school in the open air. Teacher and pupils are sitting on the ground, in a circle. The teacher has an open book in front of him, put on a sort of desk or writing chest, and most pupils are holding books as well. A pen box can be seen on the foreground, at the left. At the left side, within the circle, a smaller circle of pupils can be distinguished. The pupils who would have sat in the foreground with their backs to the photographer have apparently gone to the back so that they could see what was happening and could be seen by the photographer.
Album 11:053, Isfahan, a group of Mustawfi’s (secretaries) and Mirza’s (notables). Photograph by Ernst Hoeltzer (1835-1911). Collodion print, c. 1890. The picture shows three rows of dignitaries, sitting on the ground, sitting on chairs, and standing at the back. The most important man (very likely the Atabak A’azam) is the one sitting in the middle row in the centre. Those in the front row all have the tools of their trade at hand: reed pen, pen box, paper. The man sitting in front, at the right side, holds a pair of scissors. One of the standing men holds a pen box as well. All men are dressed traditionally, except one in the back row who wears a European costume. The man sitting at the right of the picture, who is dressed in an overcoat, and who is holding his watch (a symbol of modernity), is identified as ‘Aganooor’. The photograph was apparently made in a makeshift studio.
* Album 11:001. Isfahan, the Sheikh al-Islam. Photograph by Ernst Hoeltzer (1835-1911). Collodion print, c. 1890. The religious dignitary is elaborately dressed, with a robe over his dress, and wearing a white turban. Looking self-conscious and confident, he is seated on a chair and smokes a nargileh. Behind his chair two attendants are waiting. The one at the Sheikh's left shoulder has a book in his right hand and may be a secretary.
Qajar Era Photography

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from Qajar Era Photography Collections in the Netherlands

Editor-in-Chief
L.A.Ferydoun Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doorn

Editors
Sahar Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doorn-Khosravani,
Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar, Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood,
Willem Vogelsang and Corien Vuurman

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