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). 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.5

Angelo Piemontese’s well-researched and informative article, “The Photographic 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-


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 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.