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CARPET COLLECTING IN IRAN, 1873–1883: ROBERT MURDOCH SMITH AND THE FORMATION OF THE MODERN PERSIAN CARPET INDUSTRY

The foundation of the Persian arts and crafts collection in the South Kensington (later Victoria and Albert) Museum in London is well documented. In 1873 the museum engaged a British subject named Robert Murdoch Smith, an employee, and later director, of the British-owned and -built telegraph company which began full service in Iran in 1865 to start purchasing Iranian art and artifacts for the purpose of developing a collection. Murdoch Smith collected both for the South Kensington Museum and for the British Museum for over ten years, and his purchases clearly stimulated the South Kensington Museum to expand its Persian collection when objects became available in London. During that period he established contact with merchants in the major cities of Iran, with the exception of Tabriz, with members of the ulema in Tehran and in the provinces, with highly placed bureaucrats at court, with Nasir al-Din Shah, and with several permanent European residents of Iran engaged in art collection.

Smith's activities not only reflected the growing European interest in Iranian arts, crafts, and antiquities; they also helped stimulate, perhaps even create, a demand for these items, which in turn acted as a catalyst for the development of particular crafts, most notably carpet knotting, for the export market. The records of Murdoch Smith's art collecting contain information about the status of contemporary Iranian crafts including carpet production, merchant networks, the Qajar bureaucracy, and the transactions between Britons and Iranians dealing in art in the late nineteenth century.

On April 28, 1873, Robert Murdoch Smith wrote to Henry Cole, Director of the Department of Science and Art of the South Kensington Museum, following earlier conversations between the two men concerning the building of a Persian art collection for the museum. Because Murdoch Smith's letter of application presented so completely and accurately both the possibilities and the limitations of art acquisition in Iran, it is worth reproducing in full:

With references to our recent conversation I beg to inform you that, on my return to Persia to resume my official duties there in September next, I shall be happy to render your department any service in my power, in the way of purchasing artistic and ornamental objects, reporting periodically on my purchases and on such other objects of greater value as may appear to be suitable for the Museum, and generally as acting as an agent in Persia of the Department of Science and Art, should the India Office, on application, offer no objection to my doing so.

There are no collections of such objects for ordinary sale in Persia, although many exist in private houses in every large town in the country. By death or embarrassed circumstances of the owners, such objects not frequently pass into the hands of the bazaar brokers, from whom they may be bought. They are usually however produced in very small numbers at a time, and no purchase can be concluded except after long bargaining and repeated references by the brokers to their clients. It is therefore impossible to obtain anything like a collection of Persian articles of this kind otherwise than by frequent purchases as occasions offer during a series of years.

As my duties bring me into contact with Persians of all classes not only in the Capital but throughout the country, I should naturally have more opportunities than others less favorably circumstanced of hearing of the existence of artistic objects, which might be procured. And even in places where I was not personally present, I might enlist the aid of some of my English subordinates, with whom I could always communicate by telegraph.

Should the Department of Science and Art decide on employing me in the capacity above referred to, I would beg to suggest that instructions be given me regarding the objects to be purchased, the limit to which I might act on my own responsibility without special reference to London, the nature of the accounts and vouchers required, etc. With regard to the last, I may mention that Persian vouchers (of necessity almost the only ones in this case) are in themselves of little value and are sometimes difficult to obtain owing to the repugnance the Persians have to transacting business by writing. It would probably be thought advisable that I should furnish the Department with a periodical report of my proceedings, say once a month. It would also I think be expedient to allow me to pay, as stimulus to exertion, a small percentage commission on purchases affected at a distance by means of subordinate agents.
There would be no difficulty regarding what may be called the “banking” transactions as I could always obtain cash in Persian currency in Teheran by drawing bills on London. And similarly, I could transmit it to other ports of Persia by means of bills payable in Teheran.

The question of my own remuneration, should my services be deemed acceptable, I beg to leave for the consideration of the Right Honourable Committee of the Privy Council on Education.\(^6\)

In May of 1873 the directors of the South Kensington Museum authorized Murdoch Smith to begin collecting Iranian objects for the museum. He was to spend no more than one hundred pounds monthly, subject to the approval of the India Office. For each submitted purchase report, Murdoch Smith was to receive ten guineas.\(^3\) Before leaving for Teheran, he began to catalogue the existing museum holdings of Persian art with a view toward those areas that needed to be supplemented and those areas that needed to be established. He divided Iranian arts and crafts into the following categories: woodwork, musical instruments, arms, books, metalwork, textiles, jewelry, and earthenware. According to his inventory, the museum had in its collection some woodwork, mainly Shirazi mosaic (khātem) and several carved pearwood spoons from Abadeh, two musical instruments (a whistle and a guitar, probably a tar), one article of weaponry, two pieces of gold or silverwork, one felt carpet, two pieces of jewelry, and a good but “far from complete” collection of earthenware.\(^4\) It had no books or manuscripts. Murdoch Smith commented that large numbers of old arms including scimitars, double-edged swords, daggers, knives, battle axes and clubs were available in Iran; also “manuscripts of all ages abound in the country”\(^5\); much metalwork, gold and silverwork, jewelry, earthenware and carpets, felts, silks, shawls, printed calicoes and embroideries could also be purchased.\(^6\)

Murdoch Smith was a Scottish-born engineer who had become the director of the Persian telegraph department in 1865, after working less than two years for the company in Iran.\(^7\) He had a keen interest in archaeology and, before his Iranian service, had participated in several excavations of Greek sites which had provided important classical sculptures for the British Museum.\(^8\) Thus, he was experienced in gathering antiquities and in dealing with museums before he came to Iran.

While supervising the operations of the telegraph company, Murdoch Smith traveled throughout Iran and observed not only what was available on the market, but the processes of production, the uses to which arts and crafts items were put, the places where the various crafts were produced, the various networks necessary to procure “specimens of ancient as well as modern date,” and the market value of the items to be acquired. He introduced a note of urgency into his early correspondence with the museum directors, suggesting that they begin purchasing items immediately, because future railroad development would open the country-side to foreign dealers, and the most valuable items, especially antiquities, would be scattered throughout Europe “in innumerable public and private collections.”\(^9\) He also suggested that “pseudo oriental articles of European origin” would soon take the place of genuine Persian craft, perhaps having in mind the undercutting of the shawl industry of Kirman by machine-made paisleys from Scotland.\(^10\)

Murdoch Smith was aware that the machine production of the West would threaten the quality of Iranian crafts, and that this process would create greater demand for traditional crafts and antique items, thereby driving up their prices. There is no indication, however, that he foresaw the shift of artisans, especially women, from traditional textile industries to the hand-knotted carpet industry, a development that was undertaken not long after his arrival by Iranian, British, and German firms and entrepreneurs. By 1900 the hand-knotted carpet became Iran’s largest export item to the West.

Murdoch Smith arrived in Tehran in September of 1873 and busied himself immediately in buying Iranian art for the South Kensington Museum. He wrote to the museum directors on November 3 that he had already bought over eighty articles, primarily old Persian faience, some carved metalwork and a suit of armor.\(^11\) He drew the necessary £55 on an account payable to Baron Julius de Reuter, and promised to accompany the goods to Bushire “whence they can be shipped direct to London via the Suez Canal, thereby avoiding the numerous trans-shipments and long land journeys by the Caspian or the Black Sea.”\(^12\) Murdoch Smith informed the museum that en route to Bushire he would inspect the telegraph offices in Qum, Kashan, Isfahan, and Shiraz and would attempt to purchase more items at each of these stops.

Throughout 1874 Murdoch Smith concentrated on acquiring textiles for the South Kensington Museum. Virtually all of his purchases were embroideries of one form or another, including those items he labeled as carpets. From Isfahan came an embroidered rusarandaz,