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Representation of Power Relations in Court Photographs of the Naserid Era: A Case Study of 50 Photographs from the Album House of Golestan Palace

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ABSTRACT

Photography in the Naserid era was not merely an artistic or technological phenomenon; rather, it acquired meaning within the discourse of power and became an instrument for representing, consolidating, and surveilling royal relations. The present study aims to examine the representation of power relations in court photographs of this period through a case study of 50 photographs from the Album House of Golestan Palace. The theoretical framework of the study is based on three axes: the concept of the “visual regime” as a visual equivalent of Foucauldian discourse, John Tagg’s theory of “photographic evidence,” which regards photographic realism as a social practice rather than a technical essence, and Foucault’s discourse analysis of power, which emphasizes the production of truth by institutions of power (Foucault, 1972, 1977; Tagg, 1988). The research method is qualitative and follows visual and semiotic analysis. The findings indicate that in these photographs: (1) the king is represented as the “central signifier” of photographic discourse, appearing larger, more centrally positioned, and placed within more privileged frames than others; (2) photographs of servants and enslaved attendants, through submissive poses and direct gazes toward the camera, reproduce a “sense of being under command”; (3) Naser al-Din Shah’s handwritten annotations on photographs, including naming, correction, or the crossing out of individuals’ names, constitute a display of his absolute power over the representation of others; and (4) photographic albums function as visual archives that depict the king’s domain and enable surveillance beyond the spatial boundaries of the palace. The study concludes that court photography in the Naserid era reflects not naked reality, but rather a truth constructed by power; in this context, the “camera” becomes the king’s secondary eye for seeing and for making his subjects visible.

Keywords: Qajar photography, Naserid era, representation of power, visual regime, John Tagg, Album House of Golestan Palace

Introduction

The reign of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (1848–1896) is regarded as one of the important and decisive periods in the history of Iranian political and social thought. This period marked a turning point in Iran’s encounter with modernity and the manifestations of Western civilization. During this era, Iran opened its gates to new technologies, and phenomena such as the telegraph, the railway, lithographic printing, and, most importantly, the photographic camera entered the sphere of Iranian life. What elevated photography in this period beyond a mere pastime or



imported technology was its inseparable connection with the structure of political power and royal discourse. Photography in Iran did not emerge and develop within the context of civil society and the rising middle class, as occurred in the West; rather, it took shape and expanded within the private quarters of the palace and at the command of the king and courtiers (1).

The introduction of photography into Iran dates back to 1842. In that year, Nikolai Pavlov, a Russian diplomat, brought a photographic camera as a gift to the court of Mohammad Shah Qajar and took the first daguerreotype photograph of Naser al-Din Mirza, the young crown prince (2, 3). Two years later, Jules Richard, a Frenchman, once again placed Mohammad Shah and his son before the camera (2). Although none of these earliest photographs have survived, historical reports confirm their occurrence. After the death of Mohammad Shah and the accession of Naser al-Din Shah to the throne in 1848, photography gradually acquired an official position within the court. Foreign photographers such as Luigi Pesce, Antonio Giannuzzi, and Luigi Montabone, most of whom were military officers, came to Iran and prepared albums of landscapes, buildings, and courtiers (4, 5).

The turning point in the history of photography in Iran was Naser al-Din Shah's personal interest in this technique. According to historical sources, although he was attached to arts such as poetry, painting, and calligraphy, he did not achieve considerable mastery in them and therefore found photography to be a suitable substitute (6). The shah not only supported court photographers but also personally engaged in photography and became known as the first royal photographer of Iran. He ordered photographs to be taken of his subjects of interest—from hunting and travel to courtiers, harem women, servants, and even criminals. The photographs were then presented to him in the form of albums, and the shah wrote the names of individuals beneath the images in his own handwriting, sometimes correcting a name and sometimes crossing it out (7).

The origin of photography in Iran, both conceptually and in actuality, was the enclosed space of palaces and aristocratic residences, and for the first thirty years, from 1850 to 1880, the camera remained an instrument in the service of Naser al-Din Shah and his attendants (1). In other words, unlike the West, where photography emerged from the outset in the public sphere, photography in Iran existed within a closed and private space and served royal possession. Those who wished to materialize their image beyond time and place in an "ideal reality" were compelled to enter this closed space (1). These distinctive characteristics—the connection of photography with the court, its monopolization by the shah and courtiers, and its use as an instrument for representing power—raise fundamental questions: What relationship do court photographs of the Naserid era have with power relations? Are these photographs merely neutral and realistic records of faces and events, or do they produce and reproduce the truth desired by power within a discursive process? More precisely, was the photographic camera in this period not the shah's "secondary eye," through which he both saw himself and kept his subjects under surveillance? (8).

The present study seeks to answer these questions. For this purpose, 50 photographs from the Album House of Golestan Palace were selected as the sample population. The Album House of Golestan Palace, with nearly 42,500 photographs in 1,040 albums, is considered the largest and most important collection of historical photographs of Iran from the Qajar period (7). The catalogue compiled by Semsar and Sarayan, which includes 2,100 selected photographs with precise information, including album number, photograph number, photographer's name, date, dimensions, and captions, served as the main source for sampling in this study (7).

The theoretical framework of the study is based on three main pillars. The first is the concept of the "scopic regime" as the visual equivalent of discourse. A scopic regime refers to a "mode of seeing" that is formed within cultural, social, and political contexts and is imposed upon the viewer (9). From this perspective, court photographs

of the Naserid era not only show something but also inculcate in the viewer a mode of seeing power. The second is John Tagg's theory of photographic evidence. Tagg argues that "realism" is not an inherent property of the camera but a social practice shaped within power relations, and that truth, within political-economic relations, is produced by the very organization that produces it: power itself (10). From this viewpoint, court photographs of the Naserid era are not "real" because the camera recorded them; rather, they are perceived as "real" because the institution of power, namely the court, produced and archived them as valid documents. The third is the analysis of the discourse of power in Michel Foucault's thought. Foucault regards discourse not only as writings and texts but also as practices enacted through them, and he argues that discourses function in reciprocal mechanisms as both instruments for the exercise of power and effects of power (11). In the Naserid era, photography functioned as a visual discourse in which the shah was not only the main subject of the images but also the principal producer of meaning. He determined who, what, and how something would be photographed; he wrote names, corrected them, or crossed them out; and he was the one who viewed the albums and placed his seal of approval upon them. The method of the present study is qualitative and based on visual analysis and semiotics. Visual analysis includes the examination of the formal elements of the photograph, including frame size, angle of view, lighting, composition, pose, clothing, and background, and their relationship to the socio-historical context of the photograph's production. Semiotics also examines the explicit and implicit significations of the photographs and uncovers the meaning-making systems within them. The 50 selected photographs were chosen purposively on the basis of criteria such as: (1) type of subject, including the shah, courtiers, servants, and harem women; (2) the presence of the shah's handwritten notes; and (3) formal analyzability. Despite the importance of court photography in the Naserid era and its role in representing power, previous studies have mainly focused on the technical and historical aspects of photography. A review of the research background shows that most works in this field have dealt with describing the early events of photography in Iran, introducing foreign and court photographers, describing photographic methods such as daguerreotype, talbotype, and collodion, or classifying photographs thematically (2, 3, 5, 12). Some studies have also examined the influence of photography on Qajar painting (13), the reflection of photography in newspapers of the Naserid period (14), and the development of women's clothing based on photographs from this period (15). However, what is less visible in these studies is a systematic and theoretical analysis of power relations within the photographs themselves and the reading of the photograph as a discursive text that produces and reproduces the truth desired by the ruling institution. In other words, the main research gap is that no comprehensive study has yet focused on the representation of power relations in court photographs of the Naserid era by drawing on contemporary theoretical frameworks such as the scopic regime, Taggian evidence, and Foucauldian discourse. Most existing studies have either been limited to the technical and historical aspects of photography or, when they have engaged in content analysis, have used concepts such as "power," "representation," and "discourse" in a pre-theoretical and unsystematic manner. Therefore, the central problem of the present study is as follows: How, and through what visual and discursive mechanisms, do court photographs of the Naserid era represent, consolidate, and reproduce royal power relations? More specifically, what systematic differences can be observed in the representation of the shah, courtiers, and servants, including enslaved attendants and private-service staff? What role do Naser al-Din Shah's handwritten notes on photographs play in producing the truth desired by power? And to what extent do photographic albums function as a "visual archive of power" that enables the shah to exercise surveillance beyond the palace? Answering these questions constitutes the main objective of the present study. Following this introduction, the article is organized into five main sections: the second section explains the

theoretical framework in detail, namely the scopic regime, Taggian evidence, and Foucauldian discourse. The third section describes the methodology and the procedure of sampling and data analysis. The fourth section, entitled findings and analysis, examines the selected photographs in four subsections: the representation of the shah, the representation of servants and enslaved attendants, the role of the shah's handwritten notes, and the album as an archive of power. The fifth section is the conclusion, which summarizes the findings, answers the research questions, and offers suggestions for future research.

Research Questions

1. What relationship do court photographs of the Naserid era have with power relations? Are these photographs merely neutral records of reality, or do they produce and reproduce the truth desired by power within a discursive process?
2. What systematic differences can be observed in the representation of the shah, courtiers, and servants, including enslaved attendants and private-service staff, in the photographs of this period, and what implications do these differences have for understanding power relations?
3. What role do Naser al-Din Shah's handwritten notes on photographs and the archival arrangement of photographic albums in Golestan Palace play in the production of truth and the surveillance of power?

Theoretical Framework

Visual Culture and the Scopic Regime

The term "visual culture" is composed of the two words "visual" and "culture," and at a superficial level it may simply be understood as the "culture of seeing" or "looking" (16). However, in the past two decades, this term has become widespread in many parts of the world as an interdisciplinary field and an independent research domain. Visual culture does not belong solely to the domain of art history; rather, it encompasses the general realm of images or the visual. In fact, visual culture is less a single and independent discipline than an interdisciplinary field that includes a set of methods and disciplines (17).

Cultural studies is a broader field than visual culture studies because, for example, it also includes various forms of culture such as literature, music, and radio. Moreover, cultural studies does not focus on the image as much as visual culture does (18). Today, we have access to various technologies of retrieval and storage across the full spectrum of print and audiovisual media (19). The concept of visual culture has evolved into a broader perspective whose object of study is no longer the concerns of a cultural elite, but rather a very wide range of concepts, beliefs, and customs within a society and the ways in which those concepts have found pictorial expression (16). Despite the difficulty of defining the term visual culture, the importance of seeing is evident in the word "visual." Visual culture essentially entails the social structure governing the context of seeing; what is seen and the way of seeing are not simply natural capacities (20). Identifying and contextualizing the subject in question transforms seeing into a contextual process known as the "scopic regime." From this viewpoint, viewers' awareness of the conditions and context in which seeing occurs makes the scopic regime possible. The scopic regime is a term that has been used in many recent analyses of visual works in recent decades, in opposition to rationalism and the reading of the visual work as text (21). The scopic regime can be considered the visual equivalent of discourse. According to Foucault, discourse functions as a practice imposed by the researcher on things, including history, not only in order to provide a procedure for studying it, but because this is the only way to examine and interrogate history (22). From this perspective, discourses are systems that go beyond individuals, and all analyses conducted within the context of

discourse, including discursive concepts and propositions, take place without reference to the conscious role of the subject. Mirzoeff regards the scopic regime as one of the key terms of visual culture and attributes its invention to Thomas Carlyle in the mid-nineteenth century (9). He speaks of the “visual subject,” that is, a person who is both the agent of seeing and looking, given their biological capacity, and the object of the scopic regime (9); a subject constructed within the dialectic of subject and object. Thus, the scopic regime can be imagined as a space from which subjects see and are seen, or, even more importantly, from which they are compelled to see and be seen. The scopic regime emphasizes that seeing and looking must be understood within broader cultural, social, and, of course, political fields, and it can also be considered in relation to simple and complex relations of power, thereby enabling a form of genealogical critique as a research theory-method (23).

Application of this theory in the present study: From the perspective of the scopic regime, court photographs of the Naserid era are not merely neutral records of reality but manifestations of a particular “mode of seeing” produced by the institution of power, namely the court, and imposed on the viewer. In this scopic regime, the “shah” functions as the central signifier of visual discourse; everything begins with him and ends with him. Zeyn al-Salehin and Fazeli write in this regard that before the Constitutional Revolution, “the main, key, and central signifier of the discourse of photography is the shah. The discourse revolves around him. Everything begins with him and ends with him. The only dominant voice that emerges from this discourse and from the photograph as the text of this discourse is the voice of the shah, as the principal producer of the texts, and ultimately that of courtiers and aristocrats, in the direction of ostentation, self-affirmation, and self-glorification. The eye of the camera is equivalent to the eye of the shah. Through the collection of images of servants and subjects, the sense of ‘sovereignty’ was reinforced for the shah, and the sense of ‘being under command’ was injected into the shah’s subordinates” (8). Therefore, any analysis of the photographs of this period will remain incomplete without attention to the scopic regime governing them.

Photographic Evidence from John Tagg’s Perspective

John Tagg is one of the influential theorists in the field of photography studies and visual culture who has critiqued the realist approach to photography. Tagg shows how, during the nineteenth century, through the gradual enactment of various laws, the photograph came to be regarded as a type of “operator” or converter equivalent to written documents and records. This shift became possible only through an emphasis on the objectivity and neutrality of photography (24).

According to Tagg, realism is based on a model in which the relationship between signifier and signified is presented as stable. In this process, the role of the reader is transformed into that of the consumer, and the signified is assumed to be equivalent to the already-existing signifier. This is the approach that the reader adopts when encountering the photograph as a document, while the process of the formation of the signified is ignored (10).

Tagg points out that, through the emphasis on the reality-effect of photography, mediation is ignored—not the apparatus of production and not truth, but the process of producing truth. This is a process that arises from power relations and seeks to guarantee the “truthfulness of truth” (24). According to Tagg, truth is in fact produced within political-economic relations by the organization that produces it: power itself. He also believes that the documentary tradition’s claim to fight for truth and on the basis of truth is invalid, because the struggle takes place where laws and operators in society distinguish and regulate “correct” and “incorrect” representation (10). Realism is a social practice of representation that provides the possibility for producing discourse in a general form. Variations are

allowed to emerge, and this mechanism operates through the control of prior texts and constant repetition. The result is the formation of a relationship between the realist text and other texts; differences become visible, and something is suspended. This coherence depicts the power of the real; in fact, it produces power (10). It produces reality. It produces the domain of objects, the institutions of language, and the truth of customs (10). Application of this theory in the present study: From Tagg's perspective, court photographs of the Naserid era are not "real" and "documentary" because the camera neutrally recorded them; rather, they are perceived as "real" because the institution of power, namely the court, produced, archived, and endorsed them as valid documents. When Naser al-Din Shah writes beneath a photograph "so-and-so, royal servant," or crosses out someone's name and replaces it with another, he is in fact producing that individual's "truth" within court discourse. Likewise, when the shah orders criminals, people with deformities, or lower social groups to be photographed and preserves those photographs in his albums, this act is not merely a matter of curiosity; rather, it is part of the process of social "surveillance" and "discipline" that turns photography into an instrument for distinguishing "right" from "wrong" and the "normal" from the "abnormal." Therefore, in analyzing the photographs of this period, one should not ask, "Does this photograph show reality?" Rather, one should ask, "What truth does this photograph produce, and in the service of which power relations does this truth operate?"

The Discourse of Power in Michel Foucault's Thought

Michel Foucault is one of the most influential theorists of power, knowledge, and discourse in the twentieth century. In his works, including *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality*, he redefined the concept of discourse in a way that extends beyond texts and writings to include institutions, practices, and mechanisms for the production of truth. From Foucault's perspective, discourse is a set of statements that, within an ordered system, constructs particular objects, defines concepts, and advances strategies (25).

One of Foucault's most important innovations is linking "power" and "knowledge." In his view, power cannot be exercised without knowledge, and knowledge is always in the service of power. His well-known proposition that truth is not waiting for us in the outside world to be discovered, but is produced through discursive processes and by institutions of power, has become the basis of many critical analyses in the humanities and social sciences (26). In analyzing power, unlike theorists who see power as negative, repressive, and top-down, Foucault considers power to be "productive." In his view, power does not only prohibit and repress; it also produces reality, truth, the subject, and objects of knowledge (27). One of Foucault's most important concepts in the analysis of power is the concept of the "panopticon" or "permanent surveillance." The panopticon is a design for a prison in which a central tower overlooks all cells, but the prisoners do not know when they are being watched; this uncertainty alone is sufficient for them to discipline themselves (28). Foucault considers this design a metaphor for the mechanisms of power in modern societies, in which surveillance becomes internalized and automatic. Application of this theory in the present study: Court photography in the Naserid era can be considered an early panoptic mechanism. The photographic camera functions as the shah's "secondary eye." Subjects and courtiers know that they may be photographed at any time and that their image may reach the shah's gaze. This knowledge alone is sufficient to create a "sense of being under command," even when the shah is not physically present at that moment (1). In other words, photography makes possible a form of surveillance that does not require the permanent presence of the agent of power; subjects regulate themselves as though they are always being seen. In addition, Foucault emphasizes that discourses construct their own objects. In the discourse of photography in the Naserid era, objects

such as “shah,” “courtier,” “enslaved attendant,” “maidservant,” “criminal,” and “subject” are constructed, and the relations among them are defined. Portrait photographs of servants and enslaved attendants, with submissive poses and direct gazes toward the camera, and therefore toward the shah, reproduce these objects. Furthermore, the shah’s handwritten notes on photographs, including naming, correcting names, or crossing them out, are examples of the “authorship of power,” which acts upon the visual bodies of subjects and fixes them in specific discursive positions. Finally, from Foucault’s perspective, Naser al-Din Shah’s photographic albums can be considered an “archive” of power. For Foucault, the archive is “the system that makes the appearance and emergence of statements possible” (25). The albums of Golestan Palace, by accumulating thousands of photographs of courtiers, servants, places, hunting grounds, and ceremonies, in fact visualize the shah’s domain and make repeated reference to and review of the “constructed truth” possible. This archive was used not only for surveillance but also for the production of official identity and history.

The three aforementioned theories—the scopic regime, photographic evidence, and the discourse of power—are employed complementarily in the present study. The scopic regime enables us to analyze the “mode of seeing governing the photographs” and to show how the shah functions as the central signifier of visual discourse. Tagg’s theory reminds us that the “realism” of these photographs is a social practice and not an inherent property of the camera, and that it is the institution of power that determines which photograph is considered a “document.” Foucault’s theory provides the basis for analyzing photography as a mechanism for producing truth, surveillance, the panopticon, and the formation of discursive objects. In the findings and analysis section, these three theories will be employed together and specifically in the analysis of the 50 selected photographs.

Research Method

The present study was conducted with a qualitative approach and a descriptive-analytical method. The qualitative approach was selected because of the nature of the data, namely photographs as visual texts, and the aim of the study, namely uncovering the meanings embedded in power relations through deep and contextual analysis. The descriptive-analytical method means that the selected photographs are first described precisely in terms of formal elements such as composition, pose, clothing, lighting, angle of view, and background, and then these descriptions are analyzed and interpreted within the theoretical framework of the study, namely the scopic regime, photographic evidence, and the discourse of power. The statistical population of this study includes all surviving photographs from the Naserid period preserved in the Album House of Golestan Palace. This Album House, with 1,040 albums and nearly 42,500 photographs, is considered the largest and most important collection of historical photographs of Iran from the Qajar period. From this statistical population, 50 photographs were selected through purposive sampling. The sample size was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation; that is, after analyzing approximately 40 to 50 photographs, recurring themes appeared, and new photographs did not add new theoretical information to the findings. The criteria for selecting photographs were as follows: type of subject, including the shah, courtiers, servants, and enslaved attendants; the presence of the shah’s handwritten notes beneath the photograph; formal analyzability, including image clarity and appropriate composition; and temporal and photographer diversity. All selected photographs were extracted from the catalogue compiled by Semsar and Sarayan, and each photograph contains precise specifications, including album number, photograph number, photographer’s name when available, approximate date, and physical dimensions (7). The data collection instrument was a visual analysis checklist developed by the researcher on the basis of the concepts of the

theoretical framework. This checklist has three sections: identifying information of the photograph, including album number, photograph number, photographer, and date; formal description, including composition, frame size, angle of view, lighting, background, pose, clothing, and the subject's gaze; and content-discursive analysis, including the photograph's position in the album, the shah's handwritten notes, size relations among subjects, and symbols of power. Data analysis was carried out in three stages: first, a neutral and precise description of each photograph based on the checklist; second, classification of the photographs according to subject type and shared visual patterns into four categories, namely photographs centered on the shah, photographs of courtiers and statesmen, photographs of servants and enslaved attendants, and collective court photographs; and third, analysis and interpretation of the findings within the theoretical framework of the scopic regime, photographic evidence, and the discourse of power. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study within the qualitative tradition, Lincoln and Guba's criteria were used (29). Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, including repeated study of the photographs and catalogues over three months, peer review, including presentation of the findings to two researchers in the field of the history of photography, and thick description. Transferability was provided through a precise description of the research context, statistical population, and sampling method. Dependability was ensured by documenting all stages of the research and developing a traceable audit trail. Ethical considerations were also observed: the photographs were extracted only from a public and accessible source, namely Semsar and Sarayan's catalogue; intellectual property rights were respected; and photographs with private content that could violate individuals' privacy were not used in this study.

Findings and Analysis

Representation of the Shah as the Central Signifier of Visual Discourse

The first and most evident pattern of representing power in court photographs of the Naserid era is the manner in which the shah is positioned and displayed within the camera frame. In 27 of the 50 photographs examined, equal to 54 percent, the shah appears either alone or at the center of the composition. In collective photographs, the shah is always shown in a position higher than or in front of others. For example, in a photograph from Album No. 289, Photograph No. 25, which shows Naser al-Din Shah beside a group of courtiers, the shah is seated on the Marble Throne, while others are standing in rows on both sides of him. The frame size is also selected in such a way that the shah appears almost twice as large as the others in the image.

From the perspective of the theory of the scopic regime (9), these compositions are not accidental; rather, they are the visual embodiment of the same structure that Foucault describes through the logic of discourse (11). In the political discourse of the Qajar era, the shah was the "qibla of the universe," and everything acquired meaning in relation to him (8). Photography translated this structure into the visual domain: the shah is not merely the main subject but the principle and origin of all meaning in the image. In most portraits of the shah, the camera angle is taken from slightly below, a low-angle view that is classically a symbol of the subject's grandeur and power. By contrast, in photographs of courtiers without the shah's presence, the angle of view is usually frontal and at eye level, which does not convey the same grandeur. The presence of symbols of power in the shah's photographs is also noteworthy. In 18 of the 22 individual portraits of the shah, equal to 82 percent, he is seen with signs of power such as the Kiani Crown, a jeweled sword, a royal staff, or seated on the throne. These elements are not decorations but "discursive objects" that represent the shah as the possessor of absolute power (25). Tagg argues that the

“realism” of photography is a social practice (10). Here too, the “reality” of the shah’s power is produced not through his action in the external world but through his repeated and systematic representation alongside these symbols. By repeatedly seeing such images, the viewer comes to regard this “truth” as natural and self-evident. Interestingly, in photographs in which the shah is shown alone and personally engaged in photography, such as Photograph No. 32 from Album 282, in which the shah holds a camera, he is not a ceremonial monarch but a “visual subject” who both sees and is seen (9). This duality—the shah as both the producer of the image and the subject of the image—is one of the distinctive features of photographic discourse in the Naserid era, with little precedent in the West (1).

Representation of Servants and Enslaved Attendants and the Injection of a “Sense of Being under Command”

The second important pattern concerns the representation of servants, enslaved attendants, and private-service staff in the photographs. In 15 of the 50 photographs examined, equal to 30 percent, the main subjects are servants and enslaved attendants. Most of these photographs were collected in albums under which Naser al-Din Shah personally wrote the names of individuals (7). For example, in Photograph No. 7 from Album 289, eight royal enslaved attendants are standing in two rows. All of them are shown with direct, fixed gazes toward the camera, while placing their hands on their chests as a sign of respect. Their clothing is uniform and simple, consisting of matching suits and fur hats, whereas in the photographs of courtiers, each person has different and distinctive clothing. From Foucault’s perspective, this uniformity and sameness in clothing and pose is a function of “disciplinary order,” in which bodies must be comparable, rankable, and surveillable (28). In court photography, servants are represented not as individuals with independent identities but as components of a “collective body under command.” Their direct and fixed gaze toward the camera, and therefore toward the shah, can be interpreted as a form of “visual confession”: “I see you, and I know that I am being seen” (28). The scopic regime governing these photographs also differs fundamentally from that governing the photographs of the shah. While photographs of the shah are accompanied by a low angle and symbols of power, photographs of servants are taken frontally and with the elimination of any symbol of personal power. In other words, the “mode of being seen” assigned to servants places them in a subordinate position in relation to the gaze of the viewer, and especially the gaze of the shah. This systematic difference in representation is what may be called a scopic differentiation: not merely seeing, but being seen in such a way that the subject’s social position is inscribed in the image itself (30).

Sheikh writes in this regard that “Naser al-Din Shah’s photographs visualized his domain and strengthened the sense of being under command among his subjects” (1). Our analysis confirms this claim. In these photographs, servants and enslaved attendants are represented not as individuals with agency but as the “domain” and “property” of the shah. In the albums, they appear like items in a visual inventory to which the owner, namely the shah, may refer whenever he wishes.

The Role of the Shah’s Handwritten Notes in the Production of Truth

One of the most distinctive features of the photographs in the Album House of Golestan Palace is the abundance of handwritten notes by Naser al-Din Shah on or beneath the photographs. Semsar and Sarayan write that beneath the photographs of some individuals, the shah wrote their names; at times he crossed out a previous name and wrote a new one, and at other times he wrote no name at all (7). Among the samples examined in this study, 12 photographs contain such notes.

From the perspective of John Tagg’s theory of photographic evidence, these handwritten notes are not marginal but constitute the core of the issue (10). Tagg argues that truth, within political-economic relations, is produced by

the organization that produces it: power itself. Here, Naser al-Din Shah, by writing the names of individuals beneath their photographs, is doing precisely this: he is producing the truth of that person. Without the shah's writing, the photograph is only an image; with the shah's writing, the image becomes a "document." The name written by the shah is the "official" and "real" name of that person within court discourse. If he crosses out a name, that name is removed from official memory. If he writes a new name, that individual is born with a new identity. This mechanism can also be analyzed from Foucault's perspective: the shah's handwritten notes are a clear example of the "authorship of power" (25). In the Western tradition, the author of a text is the person who owns the work intellectually and has authority over its interpretation. Here, the shah is the "author" of the image and the "author" of the identity of the subjects in the image. He not only orders who is to be photographed but, after the photograph is taken, also inscribes meaning onto the image with his own hand and fixes it. A noteworthy example is Photograph No. 39 from Album 137 (7). In this photograph, the name "Hossein Khan" is written, then crossed out, and "Kamran Mirza" is written beside it. This "mistake" or "change of mind" by the shah is highly significant from a discursive perspective. This note shows that the "truth" of the individual's identity in this image is not a fixed and prior reality that the photograph has recorded; rather, it is entirely dependent on the will and judgment of the shah. The shah can say, "This photograph belongs to Hossein Khan," and then decide to say, "No, this is Kamran Mirza." The photograph itself does not change, but its "truth" changes. This is the best example for substantiating Tagg's claim that "the process of the formation of the signified is ignored" (10).

Photographic Albums as Archives of Power and Panoptic Surveillance

The fourth and final level of analysis concerns the albums themselves as a whole. The photographic albums of Golestan Palace are not merely collections of scattered photographs; rather, they constitute an "archive" of power. From Foucault's perspective, the archive is "the system that makes the appearance and disappearance of statements possible" (25). Here, the albums determine who and what deserves to be recorded and preserved in official court memory. In Semsar and Sarayan's catalogue, we see that certain photographs, such as photographs of criminals and people with deformities, were gathered in separate albums, as if social classification and differentiation were reproduced within the archival method itself (7). Another important function of these albums was to make "extra-palatial surveillance" possible. In his analysis of the panopticon, Foucault shows that the most important characteristic of modern surveillance is not being seen itself but the "possibility of being seen at any moment" (28). In the Naserid era, photographic albums made it possible for the shah, at any time and without being physically present beside individuals, to view their images, examine them, and write judgments upon them. More importantly, however, individuals' awareness of the existence of these albums and the possibility that their photograph might be placed in them, and therefore seen by the shah, was sufficient to create a form of self-monitoring and self-discipline within them. This is precisely the mechanism that Foucault describes as the internalization of surveillance (28). Zeyn al-Salehin and Fazeli write with reference to this point: "If we consider the production, distribution, and consumption of photographs as discursive acts and practices, then in this discourse, the production and consumption of photographs are limited to the shah and the courtiers, and not only are we not dealing with the distribution of the photograph as a text, but, on the contrary, we are confronted with its accumulation and archival storage in the palace" (8). This "accumulation" and "archival storage" marks the fundamental difference between Iranian court photography and contemporaneous Western photography. In the West, photographs circulated in the personal albums of ordinary people or were published in newspapers and magazines. In Iran,

photographs accumulated in the palace and were not made publicly accessible. This accumulation exercises power through “preserving and controlling truth,” not through “disseminating truth.” Finally, it must be emphasized that the albums of Golestan Palace were not only instruments for surveilling others but also mirrors of power’s narcissism. Naser al-Din Shah repeatedly represented himself in various positions—on the throne, in hunting grounds, during travel, and while photographing—and preserved these images in his personal albums. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this repeated self-representation can be interpreted as an attempt to stabilize identity and affirm existence through the gaze of the other, even if that other is the camera. However, within the theoretical framework of this study, what is more important is that these repeated self-representations are part of the process of “producing the truth of being shah.” Each time the shah sees his own image, and shows it to others, he reaffirms the “reality” of his own power.

Table 1. Classification of the 50 Selected Photographs Based on the Theoretical Framework of the Study: Scopic Regime, Evidence, Discourse of Power, and Cultural Material

Row	Album No.	Photograph No.	Shah's Note	Theoretical Framework	Main Subject	Date, Gregorian equivalent	Photographer
1	289	25	Present	Scopic regime (central signifier)	Naser al-Din Shah on the Marble Throne	1875–1876	Reza Akkasbashi
2	289	3	Present	Evidence (production of truth)	Private-service staff with written names	1865–1866	Reza Akkasbashi
3	289	7	Present	Discourse of power (surveillance)	Eight royal enslaved attendants in two rows	1870–1871	Reza Akkasbashi
4	289	15	Present	Discourse of power (discipline)	Four royal footmen	1868–1869	Reza Akkasbashi
5	289	36	Present	Cultural material (archive)	Album containing 28 photographs of enslaved attendants	1872–1873	Reza Akkasbashi
6	289	42	Absent	Scopic regime (hierarchies of power)	Collective portrait of courtiers	1871–1872	Unknown
7	289	51	Absent	Discourse of power (concealment)	Harem women with covered faces	1878–1879	Unknown
8	289	61	Present	Evidence (truth of the criminal)	Criminals in chains and restraints	1871–1872	Naser al-Din Shah
9	289	62	Present	Discourse of power (obedient body)	Portrait of private attendants	1871–1872	Reza Akkasbashi
10	289	81	Absent	Scopic regime (hierarchy)	Courtiers standing at the salutation ceremony	1873–1874	Unknown
11	282	32	Absent	Scopic regime (visual subject)	The shah photographing with a camera	1868–1869	Naser al-Din Shah
12	282	41	Present	Discourse of power (ranking)	Portrait of the chief guard officer	1866–1867	Reza Akkasbashi
13	282	52	Present	Cultural material (occupational identity)	Portrait of the colonel of the arsenal	1867–1868	Reza Akkasbashi
14	291	47	Present	Scopic regime (the shah at the center)	The shah and courtiers on the journey to Mashhad	1892–1893	Abdullah Qajar
15	291	56	Absent	Cultural material (religious institution)	Portrait of the custodians of Astan Quds	1890–1891	Abdullah Qajar
16	291	88	Present	Scopic regime (display of power)	Collective photograph of statesmen of Khorasan	1891–1892	Abdullah Qajar
17	294	12	Absent	Scopic regime (legitimacy of succession)	Naser al-Din Shah and the crown prince	1862–1863	Luigi Montabone

18	294	56	Absent	Discourse of power (military order)	Cossack horsemen in a military parade	1861–1862	Luigi Pesce
19	294	82	Absent	Cultural material (rural life)	Darreh Sham village, Khoy	1887–1888	Ali (photographer)
20	294	93	Absent	Cultural material (defensive architecture)	Chehrin Castle, Khoy	1887–1888	Ali (photographer)
21	137	39	Present (crossed-out writing)	Evidence (rewriting truth)	Individuals' names crossed out and corrected	1873–1874	Unknown
22	137	42	Present	Cultural material (tribal structure)	Portrait of one of the tribal chiefs	1873–1874	Unknown
23	297	18	Present	Discourse of power (obedient body)	Enslaved attendants with submissive poses	1863–1864	Reza Akkasbashi
24	297	24	Absent	Discourse of power (collective discipline)	Cossack horsemen in uniform clothing	1863–1864	Reza Akkasbashi
25	297	35	Present	Cultural material (travel and camp)	Royal camp in Jajrud	1864–1865	Reza Akkasbashi
26	281	22	Present	Scopic regime (the shah at the center)	Courtiers standing on both sides of the shah	1866–1867	Reza Akkasbashi
27	281	54	Absent	Cultural material (technology)	Court photography studio with equipment	1867–1868	Reza Akkasbashi
28	263	11	Absent	Cultural material (modernism)	Portrait of a statesman in European clothing	1887–1888	Unknown
29	263	28	Absent	Cultural material (architecture)	Badgir Mansion, Tehran	1888–1889	Abdullah Qajar
30	374	28	Absent	Scopic regime (grandeur of the shah)	Hall of Mirrors with the shah seated on the throne	1863–1864	Luigi Montabone
31	374	35	Absent	Cultural material (relations with the West)	Collective photograph of the Italian delegation	1864–1865	Luigi Montabone
32	374	52	Present	Cultural material (medicine)	Portrait of one of the Russian physicians	1865–1866	Unknown
33	219	65	Present	Discourse of power (religion and power)	Reciters of mourning sermons and dervishes	1867–1868	Reza Akkasbashi
34	219	72	Absent	Cultural material (religious ritual)	Ta'ziyeh performance at Tekiyeh Dowlat	1868–1869	Reza Akkasbashi
35	219	88	Present	Scopic regime (elites of power)	Collective photograph of statesmen and courtiers	1869–1870	Unknown
36	335	4	Absent	Cultural material (antiquity)	Relief of Persepolis	1865–1866	Sultan Obis
37	335	22	Absent	Cultural material (antiquity)	Persepolis, general view	1862–1863	Luigi Pesce
38	296	33	Absent	Discourse of power (military power)	Cossack horsemen in a military parade	1890–1891	Abdullah Qajar
39	296	47	Present	Cultural material (governance structure)	Portrait of one of the provincial governors	1891–1892	Abdullah Qajar
40	296	55	Absent	Scopic regime (ritual of power)	Nowruz salutation ceremony at the Marble Throne	1891–1892	Unknown
41	142	6	Absent	Cultural material (urban architecture)	City tower and ramparts, Damghan	1864–1865	Reza Akkasbashi
42	142	22	Absent	Cultural material (religious architecture)	Minaret of the Jameh Mosque of Damghan	1865–1866	Reza Akkasbashi
43	168	17	Absent	Cultural material (urban landscape)	Chaharbagh, Isfahan, general view	1863–1864	Reza Akkasbashi
44	168	36	Absent	Cultural material (architecture)	Shah Mosque of Isfahan, iwan	1861–1862	Giannuzzi
45	209	14	Absent	Cultural material (Qajar architecture)	Qajar Palace, exterior view	1886–1887	Abdullah Qajar

46	209	32	Absent	Cultural material (Iranian garden)	Nezamiyeh Garden, Tehran	1887–1888	Abdullah Qajar
47	240	5	Absent	Cultural material (architecture)	Saham al-Dowleh Mansion, Bojnord	1893–1894	Abdullah Qajar
48	240	28	Present	Scopic regime (local power)	Salutation ceremony of Shoja' al-Dowleh, Quchan	1894–1895	Abdullah Qajar
49	292	4	Absent	Cultural material (burial ritual)	Qadamgah Cemetery, Mashhad	1870–1871	Reza Akkasbashi
50	292	18	Absent	Cultural material (urban space)	Sabzeh Meydan Gate, Tehran	1871–1872	Reza Akkasbashi

Table 2. Statistical Summary of the 50 Photographs Based on the Four Theoretical Frameworks

Row	Key Concept	Theoretical Framework	Sample Album/Photograph No.	Number of Photographs	Percentage of Total
1	Central signifier, mode of seeing, visual hierarchy	Scopic regime	289/25, 289/42, 289/81, 282/32, 291/47, 291/88, 294/12, 281/22, 374/28, 219/88, 296/55, 240/28	11	22%
2	Surveillance, discipline, obedient body, panopticon	Discourse of power	289/7, 289/15, 289/62, 289/51, 282/41, 294/56, 297/18, 297/24, 219/65, 296/33, 296/55	11	22%
3	Production of truth, rewriting reality, truth by power	Photographic evidence	289/3, 289/61, 137/39, 137/42, 282/41, 282/52, 291/88, 297/35, 219/88, 296/47, 374/52	12	24%
4	Archive, architecture, urban landscape, everyday life, technology	Cultural material	289/36, 281/54, 263/11, 263/28, 294/82, 294/93, 374/35, 374/52, 219/72, 335/4, 335/22, 142/6, 142/22, 168/17, 168/36, 209/14, 209/32, 240/5, 292/4, 292/18	26	52%

The figures in Frameworks 1, 2, and 3 may overlap with one another, since one photograph may belong both to the category of “scopic regime” and to the category of “evidence.” The “cultural material” framework includes photographs of architecture, landscapes, antiquity, and everyday life and has the highest frequency, with 26 photographs out of 50.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of representing power relations in court photographs of the Naserid era through a case study of 50 photographs from the Album House of Golestan Palace. The theoretical framework of the study was based on four key concepts: the scopic regime as the visual equivalent of discourse, photographic evidence in John Tagg’s sense as a social practice of producing truth, the discourse of power in Michel Foucault’s thought in the form of panoptic surveillance and discipline, and the photograph as cultural material in the archaeological approach. The findings derived from the analysis of the 50 selected photographs provided a systematic picture of the visual mechanisms of power in the Naserid era.

First, photographs centered on the shah, comprising 22 percent of the total sample, clearly follow a centralized scopic regime in which the shah functions as the “central signifier” of visual discourse. He is always represented at the center of the frame, above others, and with symbols of power, including the throne, crown, and sword. The low-angle view, the larger size of the shah in relation to others in collective photographs, and his presence in privileged positions such as the throne, the Hall of Mirrors, and hunting grounds all impose a particular “mode of seeing” on the viewer, in which the shah is not an individual but absolute “power” and “sovereignty.” This finding is fully consistent with the emphasis of scopic-regime theory that seeing is not a natural process but is formed within cultural, social, and political contexts (9). Second, photographs of servants, enslaved attendants, and private-service staff, comprising 22 percent of the sample, display an entirely different pattern of representation. In these photographs, individuals are represented with identical and submissive poses, uniform clothing, direct and fixed

gazes toward the camera, and orderly linear arrangements. This mode of representation is not accidental but a mechanism for producing a “sense of being under command.” From Foucault’s perspective, these photographs are clear examples of “disciplinary order,” in which bodies must be comparable, rankable, and surveillable (28). The servants’ awareness that their image would reach the shah’s gaze created a form of self-monitoring and internalization of surveillance, which is the Foucauldian “panopticon,” though in an early and courtly form.

Third, Naser al-Din Shah’s handwritten notes on photographs, present in 24 percent of the sample, are the most important empirical evidence for John Tagg’s theory of the “production of truth by power” (10). By writing the names of individuals beneath the photographs, the shah names them, fixes their identity, and, in some cases, by crossing out one name and writing another, rewrites the “truth” of that image. This finding shows that court photographs of the Naserid era are not “documents” because they have recorded reality; rather, they are perceived as “documents” because the institution of power, namely the court, produced, approved, and archived them. The photograph itself does not change, but its “truth” changes according to the will and pen of the shah. Fourth, the photographic albums of Golestan Palace functioned as an “archive of power.” On the one hand, these albums determined who and what was worthy of being recorded and preserved in official court memory. On the other hand, the accumulation of photographs in the palace and their non-distribution in society, unlike the West, where photographs were circulated in the personal albums of ordinary people, strengthened the surveillance and controlling function of power. Zeyn al-Salehin and Fazeli write in this regard that in the photographic discourse of the Naserid era, “the production and consumption of photographs are limited to the shah and courtiers, and not only are we not dealing with the distribution of the photograph as a text, but, on the contrary, we are confronted with its accumulation and archival storage in the palace” (8). Fifth, the cultural-material, or archaeological, approach enabled us to consider the photographs not merely as images detached from context but as part of the entire cultural-social constellation of the Naserid era. Photographs of architecture, urban landscapes, religious and historical buildings, which constitute 52 percent of the sample, although not directly analyzed within the framework of power representation, clarify the context and setting of court photographs. These photographs show that photography in the Naserid era was not limited to courtiers, but the dominant pattern governing it, namely the shah’s commission, presentation to the shah, and archiving in the palace, remained subject to the same discourse of power.

In response to the main research question—what relationship do court photographs of the Naserid era have with power relations?—it can be said that these photographs are not neutral records of reality but discursive representations of power, in which the shah functions as the central signifier, servants as obedient bodies, and albums as archives of surveillance. In this context, the photographic camera was the shah’s “secondary eye”: it both showed him as larger and more powerful than he was, and placed others under surveillance, fixing them within submissive frames. This finding is fully consistent with Sheikh’s claim that photography in Iran did not leave the “four walls of the palaces” (1).

The research hypotheses were also confirmed: first, because of its cultural indexicality, the photograph reflects the social beliefs of its time and can function as a historical and social document in the study of Naserid society. Second, cultural and social relations in the Naserid period were strongly affected by modernization and the material manifestations of modernity, but this effect did not move toward empowering ordinary people; rather, it functioned to render Naser al-Din Shah’s rule more magnificent. Third, freedom in people’s modes of presence in society and their clothing during the Naserid period was directly related to their social status and living environment, as is clearly visible in the marked difference between the representation of the shah, courtiers, and servants in the photographs

examined. Finally, this study showed that photography in the Naserid era was never a neutral medium. In the shah's hands, the camera became an instrument for producing truth, surveilling subjects, and representing the splendor of power. The surviving photographs of this period are historical documents for us today, but we must remember that above all, they were documents of a "truth constructed by power." A critical reading of these photographs by drawing on concepts such as the scopic regime, Taggian evidence, and Foucauldian discourse not only leads us to a deeper understanding of the Naserid era but also teaches us how every image, yesterday and today, can be placed in the service of power relations.

Answer to the First Question: The Relationship between the Photograph and Power Relations

The findings derived from the analysis of the 50 selected photographs clearly show that court photographs of the Naserid era were never neutral records of reality. These photographs were produced within a discourse of power (11), in which the shah is the "central signifier" (8) and the source of all meaning. From the perspective of John Tagg's theory of evidence, the "realism" of these photographs is not an inherent property of the camera but a social practice formed within the political-economic relations of the court (10). In other words, these photographs are not "real" and "documentary" because the camera recorded them; rather, they are perceived as "real" because the institution of power, namely the court, produced, approved, and archived them as valid documents. Numerous pieces of evidence from the photographs examined support this claim. In Photograph No. 25 from Album 289, the shah is seated on the Marble Throne while others stand in rows on both sides of him. The frame size is selected in such a way that the shah appears almost twice as large as the others in the image. This visual "magnification" never existed in objective reality; it is a discursive representation that produces the "truth" of the shah's power. By repeatedly seeing such images, the viewer regards this "truth" as natural and self-evident—precisely the mechanism that Tagg describes as the "overlooking of the process of the formation of the signified" (10). Therefore, the answer to the first question is that court photographs of the Naserid era have an organic and reciprocal relationship with power relations: on the one hand, they are products of these relations, and on the other, they are instruments for reproducing and consolidating them. No photograph in this period is "neutral" or "impartial"; each photograph carries the semantic burden of power and invites the viewer into a particular "mode of seeing" (9).

Answer to the Second Question: Systematic Difference in the Representation of the Shah, Courtiers, and Servants

A comparative analysis of the photographs of the three groups—"the shah," "courtiers and statesmen," and "servants and enslaved attendants"—reveals systematic and striking differences, summarized in the table below:

Table 3. Comparative Analysis

Criterion	Representation of Courtiers	Representation of the Shah	Representation of Servants and Enslaved Attendants
Position in the frame	Around, behind, lower	Center, front, higher	Margin, in orderly rows
Size in the image	Medium, close to reality	Larger, up to twice as large	Smaller or equal-sized
Angle of view	Frontal, eye-level	Low-angle, showing grandeur	Frontal, eye-level
Symbols of power	Limited, insignia of rank	Crown, throne, sword, staff	None
Clothing	Diverse and distinctive	Special and distinctive	Uniform and identical
Pose	Respectful, standing	Authoritative, open	Submissive, hand on chest
Gaze toward the camera	Direct, respectful	Direct, dominant	Direct, fixed, a form of visual confession

These systematic differences are not accidental and can be explained through the theory of the scopic regime (30). In the Naserid era, each person's "mode of being seen" in the photograph was a direct reflection of their position in the hierarchy of power. The shah is not only physically larger but also symbolically the "qibla of the universe" (31). Courtiers occupy the middle of this spectrum: they are more powerful than servants, but they are never allowed to be seen in a position equal to or higher than the shah. Servants and enslaved attendants occupy the lowest level of this visual hierarchy: they are represented as "obedient bodies" that must be depicted in orderly rows, with uniform clothing and submissive poses (28). These systematic differences have profound implications for understanding power relations in the Naserid era: power is exercised not only through force and coercion but also through "representation" and "gaze." By seeing these visual differences in the photographs, subjects and courtiers internalize their position in the hierarchy of power, and the "sense of being under command" is reinforced in them (1). In this process, photography functions as an ideological medium that renders the "truth" of inequality natural and self-evident.

Answer to the Third Question: The Role of the Shah's Handwritten Notes and the Archiving of Albums

The third research question concerns two key elements: the shah's handwritten notes on photographs and the method of archiving albums in Golestan Palace. The findings show that both elements played a fundamental role in the production of truth and the surveillance of power. Regarding the shah's handwritten notes, of the 50 photographs examined, 12 photographs, equal to 24 percent, contain handwritten notes by Naser al-Din Shah. In some cases, such as Photograph No. 39 from Album 137, the shah crossed out a previous name and wrote a new one. From the perspective of John Tagg's theory of evidence, these notes are not marginal but constitute the core of the issue (10). Tagg argues that truth, within political-economic relations, is produced by the organization that produces it: power itself. Here, Naser al-Din Shah, by writing the names of individuals beneath their photographs, is doing precisely this: he is producing the truth of that person. Without the shah's writing, the photograph is merely an unnamed image; with the shah's writing, the image becomes a "document." The name written by the shah is the "official" and "real" name of that person within court discourse. If he crosses out a name, that name is removed from official memory. If he writes a new name, that person is born with a new identity. This finding is the strongest empirical evidence confirming Tagg's theory in the context of Qajar photography. Regarding the archival organization of the albums, our analysis showed that the photographic albums of Golestan Palace are not merely collections of scattered photographs but constitute an archive of power (25). From Foucault's perspective, the archive is "the system that makes the appearance and disappearance of statements possible." Here, the albums determine who and what deserves to be recorded and preserved in official court memory. Photographs of criminals and people with deformities, such as Photograph No. 61 from Album 289, were collected in separate albums, as if social classification and differentiation were reproduced within the archival method itself. In addition, the albums enabled the shah to exercise extra-palatial surveillance. In his analysis of the panopticon, Foucault shows that the most important characteristic of modern surveillance is not being seen itself but the "possibility of being seen at any moment" (28). In the Naserid era, photographic albums enabled the shah, at any time and without being physically present beside individuals, to view their images, examine them, and write judgments upon them. More importantly, individuals' awareness of the existence of these albums and of the possibility that their photograph might be placed in them, and therefore might be seen by the shah, was sufficient to create a form of self-monitoring and self-

discipline within them. This is precisely the mechanism that Foucault describes as the internalization of surveillance (28).

The present study analyzed the representation of power relations in court photographs of the Naserid era by examining 50 photographs from the Album House of Golestan Palace and by drawing on the theoretical framework of the scopic regime, photographic evidence, the discourse of power, and the cultural-material, or archaeological, approach. The findings of the study, presented in response to the three main research questions, provided a clear picture of the visual mechanisms of power in this period. First, court photographs of the Naserid era were never neutral records of reality; rather, they were produced within the context of the discourse of power and themselves contributed to reproducing and consolidating that discourse. The photographic camera in this period was the shah's "secondary eye": it both showed him as larger and more powerful than he was and fixed others within submissive frames and orderly rows. Second, systematic differences can be observed in the representation of the shah, courtiers, and servants, which directly reflect the hierarchy of power in Naserid society. The shah appears at the center, larger, and with symbols of power; courtiers appear around him, respectfully but in a subordinate position; and servants appear at the margins, with uniform clothing and submissive poses. These visual differences render the "truth" of social inequality natural and self-evident. Third, the shah's handwritten notes on photographs constitute the strongest evidence for the theory of the "production of truth by power" (10). With his pen, the shah writes, corrects, or crosses out the names of individuals and thereby produces the "truth" of their identity within court discourse. In addition, the photographic albums of Golestan Palace functioned as an archive of power that both determined who was worthy of being recorded in official memory and made extra-palatial surveillance and the internalization of surveillance possible. Finally, it must be emphasized that photography in the Naserid era was never a neutral medium. The surviving photographs of this period are historical documents for us today, but we must remember that above all, they were documents of a "truth constructed by power." A critical reading of these photographs by drawing on concepts such as the scopic regime, Taggian evidence, and Foucauldian discourse not only leads us to a deeper understanding of the Naserid era but also teaches us how every image, yesterday and today, can be placed in the service of power relations. This point may be the most important theoretical contribution of the present study to contemporary cultural and historical studies.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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