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Aliyeh Shirazi and the Museum: The Museum in an Iranian Woman's Travelogue in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: *The first Iranian museums, in the new sense of the word, were established by Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-1896) in Tehran. Most of our knowledge about these museums are provided by a few Iranian courtiers – most notably Etemad al-Saltaneh (1843-1896) – and a few western travelers. Āliyeh Shirāzi should be credited as the first Iranian woman who has written about the museum. In 1892, she made a pilgrimage from Kerman to Mecca through Mumbai, and she returned to Iran via Qasr-e Shirin in the west of Iran. In Mumbai, she visited a royal collection situated in a garden owned by the Queen of England. On her way back home, she spent some time in Tehran, where she was privileged to visit the Royal Museum in the Golestan Palace. Despite the brevity of her notes, they provide valuable details overlooked in other accounts concerning the Iranian museums in question. This short article seeks to contribute to the history of the museum in Iran based on the account of Aliyeh Shirazi, a female traveler and writer of the nineteenth century.*

Keywords: Iran, Qajar Period, Museum, Royal Collections, Persian Travelogues, Iranian Female Writers

Introduction

The first museum, in its modern sense, emerged in Iran during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–1896), the fourth king of the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925), following his travels to several European countries.¹ It is noteworthy that prior to this, certain rooms, known as *atiqe khāne* or *ajib khāne*, already existed within some palaces and mansions², comparable to the *Wunderkammer* or “cabinets of curiosity” in Europe. While we are informed about private and public collections prior to the Qajar

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¹ He visited Europe three times in 1873, 1878 and 1889. For a detailed study, see Jahangirfar, forthcoming.

² Takmil Homayoun, 2006: 97.

period, such rooms had first been established in the Golestan Palace in Tehran during the reign of Fath Ali Shah (r. 1797-1834).

Upon returning to Tehran from his first European tour, Naser al-Din Shah constructed a grand hall to replace the earlier rooms and thereby founding what became known as the Royal Museum (*Muze-ye Homāyouni*).³ This institution displayed royal jewels, diplomatic gifts presented to the Iranian court, and artworks acquired by the king during his European journeys. Naser al-Din Shah also established another museum in the Saltanat Abad Palace in Tehran, which focused on natural history.

We are well-informed about the Royal Museum through the travelogues of several American and European visitors to Iran, as well as a few accounts by Iranians, whereas we have very limited information concerning the second museum.

Further insights into these museums are provided by the travelogue of Aliyeh Shirazi, an Iranian adventurer who demonstrates notable courage. The details she recorded during her visits to at least two museums are significant for at least four reasons:

- 1) To the best of my knowledge, Aliyeh Shirazi is the first Iranian woman to have written about a museum.
- 2) In addition to the Royal Museum in Tehran, she writes about a museum in India. This is important as most of other surviving Qajar accounts deal with Iranian or European museums.
- 3) Her work offers valuable information about the museums she visited, helping to fill historical gaps concerning the early development of the museum in Iran.
- 4) Although she embarked on a journey as a pilgrim to Mecca and Medina and several shrines in present-day Iraq, Aliyeh Shirazi also documented her experiences with “entertainment”. This helps us place the museum in a broader narrative.

The narrative of a woman traveling independently – without her husband or immediate family – and actively seeking entertainment presents a contrast to the prevailing image of women during the Qajar period.⁴

The Traveler and Her Journey

Aliyeh Shirazi embarked on her journey from Kerman to Mecca, accompanied by a few acquaintances, transiting through India on April 23, 1892. Information regarding her age is unavailable, and her relationship with her fellow travelers remains unclear.

³ See Takmil Homayoun, 2006: 97; Ekhtiar, 2007: 86-87.

⁴ In her journal, she often maintains a sharp distinction between “entertainment” and “religious practice”. However, her notes on the *ta'zieh* performances (religious plays based on the events in Karbala) she watched in Tehran tend to blur the distinction.

Initially, a man named Vali Khan began writing the journal. However, his enthusiasm waned after only a few entries, prompting Aliyeh to assume the responsibility. During the journey, an elder lady, who was one of her companions, passed away. A young woman separated from the group on their way back home, accompanied by a different caravan. Furthermore, Vali Khan is no longer mentioned after they reach Tehran.

To reach Mecca, her group chose the maritime route, boarding a ship bound for Mumbai. As previously noted, she reveals limited personal information. However, she appears to be neither very young nor elderly. She has children awaiting her return home. While her marital status – whether her husband is deceased or alive – is not explicitly stated, she is likely a widow. This is inferred from an instance where she requests a relative in Tehran to permit her engagement to one of three merchants with whom she is settling accounts for a purchase. Such an arrangement would have established her as *mahram* (a permissible companion) to one of them.⁵

She has a good knowledge of Persian poetry, occasionally quoting verses from memory and citing the names of some poets. For instance, during a visit to the Bisotun near Kermanshah on her return journey, she remarks that the lands are verdant with grass and sown with wheat. Consequently, she states that “all the poems that Vahshi [1532-1583] and Vesal [1782-1845] have composed for the lands surrounding the Bisotun are justified”.⁶

Possessing strong religious beliefs, she frequently visited shrines in the various cities where she resided. Although these visits constituted a pilgrimage, she often expressed an eagerness to explore local bazaars and engage in leisure activities. On one occasion, after a period of free time, she wrote about enjoying good fruits and fish, lamenting that “from Kerman to Najaf, I have neither visited a place nor had leisure. Since the day I left the service of [Vali] Khan, thank God I have eaten everything and visited everywhere”.⁷ It should be emphasized that, during that era, undertaking a pilgrimage was the only form of journeys abroad for women. Notably, Naser al-Din Shah was accompanied by an entourage of approximately four hundred people during his first journey to Europe in 1873. Of this large group, only four were women: Anis al-Dowleh, one of the Shah’s favored wives, and three of her attendants. These four women accompanied the king only as far as Moscow, their initial destination, after which they were sent back to Iran. This measure was taken to prevent potential

⁵ Although she does not explicitly discuss her own or other women’s romantic desires, such a request, seemingly made in passing and perhaps not entirely serious, may be interpreted as a sign of her need for companionship. Throughout her narrative, she maintains contact with various men of different ages, communicating with them directly or indirectly on various matters. Only once, in Tehran, does she voice such a request, though the response she received is unknown.

⁶ Shirazi, 2024: 110-111.

⁷ Shirazi, 2024: 91-92.

complications, such as the inappropriate socializing of Iranian royal women, especially when veiled in a chador, with European men.⁸

The author's meticulousness is also apparent in the dated entries of her diary. She consistently begins each entry with the date, making only a few mistakes when sick or extremely busy. This attentiveness to detail is particularly noteworthy when compared to other travelogues. For instance, a travelogue by a Qajar princess, who began her journey to Mecca on May 25, 1886, exhibits frequent omissions of dates.⁹

Aliyeh Shirazi is not only observant, noting details about food, clothing, routes, living conditions, and critical of certain individuals' abusive behavior, but she also demonstrates considerable manual dexterity and a quick aptitude for learning. A good example of this is the sewing machine purchased by one of the royal women in Tehran. Despite repeated requests for instruction from tailors and hired teachers, the instructors failed to provide adequate guidance, seemingly due to "laziness" or "jealousy". She proudly recounts how she independently learned to operate the machine to a limited extent through her "own bright mind".¹⁰

The Museums

The first mention of a museum occurs during her travels in India. One day in Mumbai, she visited a garden owned by the Queen of England, which housed a collection of animals, including panthers, tigers, bears, apes, and various birds.¹¹ Following her visit to the garden, she proceeded to the *antique*, i.e. the museum. Inside, she observed preserved specimens of dead animals, such as birds, fish, and reptiles, noting, "they were dried in a way you thought they were alive".¹² The museum also featured human and animal anatomy. Further exhibits included samples of plants, fruits, medicines, minerals, and different types of cotton, wool, and silk. Edible plants and fruits were preserved through drying if possible; otherwise, replicas were produced.¹³

In another part of the museum, she saw various vessels made of porcelains, crystals, and metals. Also, crowns, helmets, men and women's clothes of the past, and finger rings were on display. She noted that labels placed next to the objects provided textual information.¹⁴

⁸ See, for instance, Keddie & Amanat, 1991: 188; see also the introduction to Shirazi's book, pp. 11-12.

⁹ This princess states her lineage from both maternal and paternal sides, but she omits her own name. On her maternal side, she is a descendant of Nader Shah Afshar (r. 1736-1747), and on her paternal side, she is granddaughter to Fath Ali Shah Qajar. See Nazemi, 2024.

¹⁰ Shirazi, 2024: 194-195.

¹¹ Shirazi, 2024: 37-38.

¹² Shirazi, 2024: 39.

¹³ Shirazi, 2024: 39.

¹⁴ Shirazi, 2024: 39-40.

To get back to Iran, she crosses the western border and enters the country via Qasr-e Shirin and continues her journey eastward until she arrives in Tehran, where she resides in an influential relative's house. She is soon invited by Naser al-Din Shah's wives and daughters, allowing her to spend several days in the company of the royal women. She references the Shah's museum(s) on three occasions within her writings. As mentioned earlier, the historical context, interior design, collections, and perceived values of the Shah's museums have been recorded by a number of Iranian, American and European writers. Among the Iranians, Etemad al-Saltaneh (1843-1896) is a particularly notable chronicler regarding the Royal Museum. The Western observers tended to emphasize the royal jewels. Some European accounts combined this with a dismissive attitude towards the Shah's collecting preferences, criticizing his acquisition of mediocre European artworks or objects deemed of negligible worth.¹⁵

Despite the brevity of her account, it provides valuable insights into Iran's first museums beyond just jewels and crystals. She specifically mentions mechanical devices, writing about several examples: a mechanical nightingale that sang when wound, a gem-inlaid mechanical peacock that walked upon winding, and an elephant automaton that moved its tail and trunk once wound up.¹⁶

Naser al-Din Shah's keen interest in various European machines and mechanical devices is evident throughout his travelogues.¹⁷ Notwithstanding, it is more likely that the elephant in question is a gift from the Russian emperor to Fath Ali Shah, the second Qajar king. Moritz von Kotzebue (1798-1861), a traveler to Iran and a companion of Count Yermoloff, a Russian embassy to Iran in 1817, documented the gifts of Alexander II of Russia (r. 1801-1825) to Fath Ali Shah. His records include "a clock in the shape of an elephant whose trunk and eyes and ears would move when working".¹⁸ Consequently, it is likely that the elephant mentioned by Aliyeh Shirazi refers to this same item rather than an object acquired or commissioned by Naser al-Din Shah.

Furthermore, Aliyeh Shirazi writes about figurines, statues, and busts. "The Shah's face has been sculpted from white stone in Farang [i.e., Europe]". Also, various animals were crafted and arranged around a table.¹⁹

¹⁵ For instance, Gertrude Bell (1928: 92) remarked that "the priceless cloisonné bowls were filled with tooth-brushes", which were displayed along with pearls and gems.

¹⁶ Shirazi, 2024: 146.

¹⁷ During his first European tour, Naser al-Din Shah spent a few days in Russia and visited the Hermitage three times. Among the objects he enumerates, there is a golden peacock "which they wound up, and which then spread its tail beautifully" (Naser al-Din Shah, 1874: 53). Moreover, he writes about other mechanical toys and objects. For instance, during his second European tour, he visits the state treasury and its museum in Vienna, where he is amused by a clock: when wound up, the figures of Marie Thérèse and Francis I, accompanied by their attendants, appeared. Satan showed up in the sky but was attacked by an angel before having a chance to destroy the king and the queen (Naser al-Din Shah, 1879: 218).

¹⁸ Quoted in Zoka, 1970: 53-54.

¹⁹ Shirazi, 2024: 146.

Afterward, she visits the zoo. We know that, in addition to the so-called Natural History Museum at the Saltanat Abad Palace, Naser al-Din Shah created a zoo at Dowshan Tappeh, near Tehran.²⁰ Shirazi's note provides further insights into the matter:

There [were] also very good furnishings, various kinds of lamps, tables and chairs of gold, all sorts. From there I went to the zoo building. Fine colorful birds, all kinds, which were previously somewhere else, they have now brought and housed them in the *Divān Khāne* [audience chamber]. There were also two lions. There was nothing else besides the various kinds of birds.²¹

The term “zoo” may merely refer to a number of birds and lions within the Divān Khāne, a part of the Golestan Palace. The origin of these specimens – whether relocated from the Dowshan Tappeh, the Natural History Museum, or another collection – is not specified. Although the Natural History Museum is documented to have housed animal paintings and entomological butterfly samples, contemporary literature does not indicate the presence of living animals.²² Nevertheless, Shirazi's reports introduce the possibility that the Saltanat Abad may have at some point housed live birds and animals.

Thus, it is plausible that the Shah ordered the transfer of some of the aforementioned creatures to the Golestan Palace, perhaps to allow for their observation without the need to travel to Dowshan Tappeh or the Saltanat Abad. His fascination with natural history is evident in his European travelogues, wherein he has dedicated extensive passages to describing European zoological and botanical gardens. In any event, Shirazi's notes concerning these birds and lions highlights another facet of museum-related activities in the Qajar period, although this branch of research and study was in its infancy in Iran at that time.

The second instance, where the museum in Tehran is mentioned, occurs in the account of a monitor lizard. Captured alive, the lizard was brought to the Golestan Palace and tethered to a tree. The king spent a while examining and playing with the animal and then he commanded that it be killed, and its skin be stuffed with hay for display in the museum.²³ As before, the text does not explicitly clarify whether the deceased animal was prepared for exhibition at the Royal Museum or the Natural History Museum.

Finally, the third time she talks about the museums is upon the Shah's return to the Golestan Palace after a journey. Accompanied by the Shah and some of the royal

²⁰ Moayyer al-Mamalek, 1982: 51; Najmi, 1996: 346.

²¹ Shirazi, 2024: 147.

²² Etemad al-Saltaneh, 1888/9: 98; Feuvrier, 1899: 261; Moayyer al-Mamalek, 1982: 51.

²³ Shirazi, 2024: 154-155.

women, Shirazi visits the Royal Museum again. She explains that since the king was on a journey, he had not visited the museum for a while. Thus, upon his return, the Divān Khāne was sealed off, and the king, accompanied by a group of courtiers and Aliyeh Shirazi, strolled in the museum.²⁴

The Muses and Their Abode

Although Aliyeh Shirazi's notes are not considered active participation in systematic museology and museography, they serve as a milestone in the historiography of the museum in Iran. The road she hit soon became a stage dominated by influential women.

While information about staff is limited and gender-related studies of early Iranian museums are scarce, we do know that women were employed in major Iranian museums a few decades after Shirazi's adventure. The women's situation was positively changed following the reforms initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941). They were often employed as professionals in various disciplines related to museum work, including archaeology and art history. Badi Riazi, served from 1938 to 1946, and Nahid Jahan Ara, served between 1946 and 1953, are only two examples of pre-historian archaeologists at the Iran Bastan Museum (Ancient Iran Museum).²⁵ Yet the apex in Iranian museology, especially concerning the role of women, was brought about by Shahbanou Farah Pahlavi. Not only the Shahbanou Bureau directly established six museums in the 1970s, she also supported the establishment of other museums across the country. Her bureau founded five museums in Tehran, namely the Negarestan Museum (1975), Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (1977), Reza Abbasi Museum (1977), Iran Carpet Museum (1978), Tehran Glass and Ceramic Museum (1981; opened after the revolution), and the Falak al-Aflāk Museum (aka Shāpour-khāst Castle) in Khorramabad (1977).²⁶ She also supported the opening of other museums such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Tehran (1961), the Museum of Rasht (1969), and the Museum of Susa (1977). Her support was instrumental in securing artifact donations and purchasing suitable buildings for museums.²⁷ Despite certain views toward women that resurfaced after the 1979 revolution, educated and skilled Iranian women have continued to occupy positions at various levels.

²⁴ Shirazi, 2024: 177. The "sealing off" was probably a security measure against theft when the museum's door was open. The Royal Museum was once targeted by thieves. This incident urged the Shah to replace the jewels with other items such crystals and porcelains (see, for instance, Bell, 1928: 93; Zoka, 1970: 165-169; Ekhtiar, 2007: 92; Diba, 2012: 653-654).

²⁵ Mostafavi, 1955: 433-435.

²⁶ Stein, 2013: 79-80.

²⁷ See Sheibaei, 1977.

Conclusion

Aliyeh Shirazi's notes on the museums she visited in Mumbai and Tehran provide important information about these institutions. Her remarks on the royal collection in India are significant because we have limited information about museums in the East contemporaneous with the Qajar period. Indeed, while most existing studies concentrate on European institutions, Shirazi's account provides limited but important material for comparative analysis with museums elsewhere.

Her notes on the museum offers narrow insights into the educational role of the museums particularly when she mentions the "anatomy" of human and animal bodies in the museum in India. Unfortunately, the terseness of her notes precludes a deeper analysis; however, her implicit remarks on the museum's educational role may situate this institution within the broader framework of social and educational reforms undertaken during the Qajar period. These themes found expression in contemporary newspapers. For instance, the Persian-language newspaper *Shekoufeh*, established and edited by Maryam Amid, was the second Iranian paper to primarily advocate women's rights. Amid and other contributors to *Shekoufeh* underscored the importance of modern education, encompassing theoretical study as well as practical teachings.²⁸ Shirazi introduces the museum as a space for education and entertainment. This perspective aligns with Etemad al-Saltaneh's writings, in which the museum is described as a place imbued with wonder and joy for learning about the physical world, environment, industries and crafts, and for showcasing valuable objects.²⁹

Furthermore, Aliyeh Shirazi's observations reveal that Naser al-Din Shah continued to enrich his collections after establishing them. Her account also indicates that statues of humans and animals were produced, at least for court use – a fact of particular significance in light of the Islamic ban on figurative sculpture.

²⁸ See Torabi, 2024.

²⁹ Etemad al-Saltaneh, 1883; Etemad al-Saltaneh, 1888/9: 97-98; see also Ekhtiar, 2007: 88-89.

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