



CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF PERSIAN MONUMENTS

CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION OF PERSIAN MONUMENTS. In almost every historical period some restoration of Persian monuments has been undertaken either by state authorities or through the efforts of charitable individuals. The concept of restoration has generally involved repairs, resurfacing, and even complete renewal of a monument, usually without knowledge of its original context or concern with its subsequent history. In Islamic Persia, until quite recently, such projects were usually carried out by Persian architects (*me'mārs*), artisans (*ostādān*), and decorators, whose efforts are often recorded in inscriptions on the restored monuments. This kind of “restoration,” which occasionally entailed major modifications or the actual replacement of a monument, continued into the modern period (Galdieri, 1986).

The history of the conservation of monuments in modern Persia, as well as evolving conceptions of what “conservation” should encompass, is not very different from that in other Middle eastern and even some European countries. Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th the notion of “cultural heritage” was vague; a monument was regarded primarily as an archeological remnant. Greater attention was therefore paid to the process of excavation, and in addition such excavation was aimed not only at scientific



historical research but also at recovering objects considered to have intrinsic value as testimonials to a lost civilization. In Qajar Persia archeological research was almost entirely monopolized by the French, owing to a special concession to the French government in 1312/1895, perhaps partly in compensation for substantial French loans to the Persian government. Under this concession [Marcel](#) and [Jane Dieulafoy](#) conducted their researches, and the *Délégation archéologique en Perse* (q.v.) was established.

The foreign research institutions operating in Persia gradually enlarged their interests from the Mesopotamian and Elamite civilizations to include the Achaemenid period but only later the monuments of early Islamic Persia. Roman Ghirshman, Friedrich Sarre, Ernst Herzfeld, and other notable figures conducted investigations in Persia before World War II, but archeological research and the antiquities market often followed close paths, engendering mutual suspicion and hostility.

Between 1304 Š./1925 and 1309 Š./1930, in large part owing to the work of the American Arthur Upham Pope, a new interest in the artistic and architectural legacy of Persia spread both in Persia itself, under the Pahlavis (1304-57 Š./1925-79), and in the West; the ensuing cultural debate broke the connection between archaeology and antiquarianism and shifted the emphasis to a historical, though at the same time chauvinistic, view of the Persian past. Monuments—especially ancient monuments—eventually achieved the status of autonomous and concrete witnesses, works of art in themselves. As a result there were some attempts at conservation, though still immature and often contradictory. One such contradiction reflected emerging Persian nationalism: Official interest and state conservation efforts tended to be focused on remains of the distant Persian past, as part of a quest for “dynastic continuity,” instead of on more recent but already decaying examples of Safavid and Qajar architecture. This attitude, though in less radical form, persisted until at least as late as the end of the 1960s.

A general lack of interest in architecture (not to be confused with lack of interest in the home itself) contributed to the widespread disinterest in preserving more recent constructions. It was conditioned by several factors, including the nomadic way of life prevailing in many parts of the country, a tradition of refraining from ostentatious living for fear of attracting the attention of greedy officials, the threat of earthquakes, and traditional building materials, which were often inappropriately used and therefore not durable. It is thus easy to explain a certain distrust in recent or contemporary



constructions and admiration for the majestic stone structures of the past. A more specific element affecting the integrity of historic buildings was the habit, over the past fifty years, of “renewing” wall paintings and decorations, which could be found even in modest buildings, with inappropriate materials, for example, linseed oil, which does not preserve the decorated surface but instead forms an impermeable film that is subject to rapid physical and chromatic transformation. Another cause of deterioration was the dramatic increase in atmospheric humidity in Persia, owing in particular to the construction of large dams and reservoirs in the 1950s and 1960s, with severe consequences for painted and stuccoed wall decorations. Furthermore, between the 1960s and the early 1980s a major problem with air pollution developed, owing to greatly increased automobile traffic and new industries, of which oil refineries and steel factories were the most damaging. The effects on stone monuments were so drastic that officials of the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) became alarmed (Sussman). Aside from damage caused by human intervention, there were natural causes of decay as well: for example, formation of lichens on the northern faces of stone monuments at Tāq-e Bostān, Naqš-e Rostam, Kangāvar, and elsewhere (Mora) and the action of xylophagous insects on the tall columns of plane wood in the [Čehel Sotūn](#) and [‘Alī Qāpū](#) at Isfahan. Throughout most of the modern period these difficulties were further aggravated by an almost total lack of maintenance, in the sense of periodic inspection and consequent restoration of the static and aesthetic conditions of the buildings.

Conservation in the first half of the 20th century. Initial steps for the preservation of Persian antiquities were taken in 1296 Š./1917, when a department of antiquities (Šo’ba-ye ‘atīqāt, later Dā’era-ye ‘atīqāt), with a modest museum (Mūza-ye Iran), was created in the Ministry of education by the minister, Mortazā Khan Momtāz-al-Molk, who appointed the well-known poet Īraj Mīrzā as its first director. Some of the most important official initiatives in favor of the preservation of Persian monuments were taken in the 1920s and early 1930s. In 1301 Š./1922 the National monument council ([Anjoman-e ātār-e melli](#)) was established to promote interest in the cultural heritage of Persia and ensure preservation of its monuments. In 1306 Š./1927 the government canceled the French concession but undertook to establish in Tehran an archeological museum with a Frenchman as director for at least fifteen years (Ma’šūmī, p. 5). In 1307 Š./1928 the Department of national antiquities was established and in the same year, despite pressure from other



interested governments, primarily the United States, the French architect André Godard was appointed director, thus perpetuating the cultural conditioning of the past. In 1309 Š./1930, with the advice of Godard, the Majles enacted an antiquities law (Qānūn-e ‘atīqāt), embodying for the first time precise regulations for classification and conservation of monuments and historical sites. As part of this effort the most important monuments and ancient sites were to be identified and registered. The law forbade restoration or alteration of any registered monument without permission and supervision by the antiquities service. At the same time a section for the protection of historic buildings (Ḥefẓ-e banāhā-ye tārikī) was established within the department, in order to oversee the conservation of monuments. Persian architects and builders (*bannā*[’s]) who were particularly experienced in traditional techniques were employed by the service. The continuity with 19th-century French archeological practice was especially clear in Godard’s methods of restoration: a tendency to adopt solutions in the “Achaemenid style” also popular for government ministries built in the 1930s, insufficient documentation of the work completed, and above all lack of interest in training a skilled local staff. He should, however, be credited with remarkable intuition and total dedication to the spread of information on Persian art in general, particularly in the conversion of the small archeological museum in Tehran (Mūza-ye Īrān-e bāstān) into a major institution, which housed, in addition to a collection of monuments and antiquities, a center for scientific research. In addition, he encouraged individual studies of Persian architectural monuments. Under his editorship seven issues of *Athār-é Īrān*, the official journal of the archeological service, appeared (1936-39); it remains a fundamental reference, only partly outdated or superseded. Godard’s tenure ended in 1336 Š./1967.

Despite Godard’s lack of interest in training Persian conservation personnel, the Persian government did make efforts in that direction. In 1313 Š./1935 a department for training archeologists was established in Dāneš-sarāy-e ‘ālī, the Persian normal school. Graduates were employed by the government at the new museum, and some of them participated with foreign experts on excavations. In 1328 Š./1949 the school of fine arts (Honarkada-ye honarhā-ye zībā), which since its creation in 1319 Š./1940 had operated under the auspices of the Ministry of education, was transferred to the University of Tehran, and a faculty of fine arts (Dāneškada-ye honarhā-ye zībā) was established; the most important of its departments was that of architecture, where Persian students were scientifically trained in both traditional and modern



architecture. Most of the members of the first graduating class were also employed in the conservation of monuments.

The American archeological mission, which was particularly active at Persepolis and Isfahan, was characterized by a pioneering enthusiasm coupled with a solid scientific foundation. A long campaign of excavation and research was initiated by Pope and the University of Pennsylvania through the American Institute for Persian Art and Archaeology; the field director was Erich F. Schmidt. Another important result of the collaboration between Persian and American bodies was publication of *A Survey of Persian Art* (12 vols., London, 1938-39), under Pope's general editorship. This monumental work contains many topical articles, covering a period of more than twenty centuries, and an extensive and very useful bibliography, which regrettably was not brought up to date in subsequent editions (1964-65; 1967) or in the supplementary volumes XIII and XIV, published in 1967 and 1968 respectively. Among the distinguished contributors to the first edition of the Survey were Godard, Herzfeld, Eric Schroeder, Oscar Reuther, David Talbot Rice, and Richard Ettinghausen. The laudable effort to broaden and update the work in the 1960s nevertheless lacked that combination of enthusiastic scholarly participation and harmonious systematization that had characterized the original work.

In the first decade after the passage of the antiquities law scholars from a variety of academic fields contributed to the knowledge and thus indirectly to the conservation of Persian monuments. Their activities and their collaboration with Persian scholars, particularly historians and archeologists like M.-T. Moṣṭafawī, Faraj-Allāh Bazl and later Ḥasan Pīrnīā, were unfortunately interrupted by World War II, and most of them were forced to return to their own countries in 1338 Š./late 1939 and early 1940. Among them were the American architect Myron Bement Smith, who was particularly active in the province of Isfahan during the years 1314-16 Š./1935-37 and who continued to promote conservation of Persian monuments after his return to the United States until his death in 1967; the Italian Ugo Monneret de Villard, who brought to bear his experience in the study of the Christian monuments of the Middle East and Islamic art in Europe; the Frenchmen E. E. Beaudouin, who produced an accurate study of architecture and city planning in the Safavid period, and Maxime Siroux, author of fundamental works on caravan routes and the Persian [caravansary](#); and the American Donald N. Wilber, who became an expert on Il-khanid and Timurid architecture. Owing partly to the



collaboration of such scholars, the register of the archeological service grew in the years 1309-34 Š./1930-55 to include 419 monuments and historical sites. By the end of 1354 Š./1975 that number had increased to 1,224 (Komīsīūn-e mellī, II, pp. 1221,1223-38; Ma‘šūmī, no. 6, p.23; Meshkati).

The great restoration projects of the 1950s-1980s. Shortly after World War II, as relations between the former belligerent powers and the officially neutral states were normalized, the Persian archeological service and foreign archeological missions forged new ties. Furthermore, as the economic position of Persia improved in the 1950s-1970s substantial funds were allocated to conservation and restoration of monuments, lending considerable momentum to these activities. One result was establishment of an archeological institute at the University of Tehran in 1338 Š./1959. Already in 1334 Š./1955 the Department of antiquities and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO), under the direction of Giuseppe Tucci, had initiated an official collaboration. The main purpose was to conduct a vast program of archeological research in Persian Sīstān, which was later expanded to include conservation of monuments and critical historical studies connected with the restorations themselves.

In 1343 Š./1964 the Persian government consulted Italian specialists about the restoration of the cave of Šāpūr in Fārs and also assigned to IsMEO the planning and scientific direction of a large program of conservation activities. The latter program included the ruins of ancient Persepolis, where work had been totally abandoned after the departure of the American mission in 1317 Š./1938 (Schmidt), and also some of the historic buildings of Isfahan, one of the former capitals of the Safavid shahs. Over the next fifteen years, until the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979, the conservation and restoration works assigned to IsMEO multiplied. The project at Persepolis alone encompassed not only structural work on the royal complex: the stairway to the terrace, the [Apadāna](#), the portal of Xerxes, the palace of Darius, the so-called “unfinished gate,” the Hall of the Hundred Columns, and the sustaining walls. It also involved identification and replacement of important decorated stone fragments found scattered over an area of 30 square miles; work on the rock-cut tomb named for Artaxerxes II; and exploration of the several stages in the construction of the entire site (Tilia). Conservation efforts included attempts to control the disintegration of the stone and the formation of microflora, as well as the dismantling and reconstruction several miles away on the plain of the river Kor of a small Achaemenid stone bridge dam, made necessary by the



construction of a large new dam on the river. Restorations of three Safavid pavilions at Isfahan, the 'Alī Qāpū, the Čehel Sotūn, and the Hašt Behešt (Zander, 1968; idem, 1970) were followed by those at the mausoleum of Pīr-e Bakrān at Lenjān, the Saljuq mosque and the Safavid caravansary at Bersiān (Barsiyan), and eventually the demanding project of restoring the great congregational mosque of Isfahan (Galdieri, 1972-84; Paone).

On 29 Ābān 1344 Š./20 November 1965 Sāzmān-e mellī ḥefāzat-e ātār-e bāstānī-e Īrān (National organization for preservation of the historic monuments of Iran) was established by royal decree in the Ministry of culture and arts (Wezārat-e farhang o honar); under its aegis technical bureaus were opened in the provincial capitals, each headed by an archeologist seconded by a civil engineer and experienced local architects (Shirazi; for a list of monuments repaired under its supervision see Ma'šūmī, no. 6). It worked in partnership with the Italian mission both in the planning and the actual restoration work. In accordance with the express desires of the Persian government and with the collaboration of the Italian government, specifically the Dipartimento per l'Assistenza Tecnica (now Direzione Generale per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo) in the Ministero per gli Affari Esteri, all sites and monuments subject to intervention became workshops for training Persian technicians and restorers. For more than ten years the most advanced conservation techniques were tested in the field, with special attention to traditional techniques and materials. In this way it was also possible to preserve or revive [crafts](#), in wood, stone, plaster, ceramics, and the like, that had been gradually disappearing. In those years also an institute for restoration was established in the department of architecture at the National University (Tehran); it entered into an agreement with the department of architecture at the Università di Firenze for a complex program of restorations at the mausoleum of Öljeitu (Ūljāytū) at Solṭānīya, which has unfortunately not yet been completed (Kassai and Sanpaolesi).

In the light of everyday practice in the field certain tentative ideas put forth in the 1950s in an attempt to develop a theoretical foundation for methods of intervention have come to be adopted as inviolable norms (e.g., the concept of the *ḥarīm*, or protected zone, surrounding a building or a historic site; maintaining a clear distinction between original and new parts; and the use of materials similar to the originals). Even though these norms must be adapted to the specific cultural and aesthetic environment at each site, they have gradually been extended from Persepolis and Isfahan to the entire country,



along with new and more appropriate procedures of critical, historical, and technical investigation. Gradually, too, a more precise and universal conception of conservation has evolved: Intervention provides a major—and unrepeatable—occasion for recovering and recording the history of a monument in order to place the latter in its precise historical, artistic, and cultural contexts in a critical but not arbitrarily selective manner (Galdieri, 1986). In the third quarter of the 20th century, therefore, as the state devoted unprecedented attention to historical monuments, a period of cautious and mature collaboration with foreign universities and institutions began, in the field of historical studies, as well as in that of active conservation.

After the Revolution and the war against Iraq. In the decade 1357-67 Š./1978-88 many Persian monuments were in repeated danger of destruction. For a time after the fall of the monarchy historical monuments, regardless of period, were considered symbols of royal political power subject to a kind of retroactive ideological censorship. The aid of self-proclaimed local historians was enlisted to determine the origins of buildings, and not only pre-Islamic monuments but also those belonging to periods of Sunnite dominance became targets of physical attack by fanatical crowds. Among the most serious episodes were attempts to damage the ruins of Persepolis, even using bulldozers (attempts that were foiled by Persian workmen who had participated in conservation projects there for several years), and destruction of the Pā-Menār mosque at Zavāra (which had not been sufficiently studied); the Mīrzā Jaʿfar *madrasa* at Mašhad; the Ḳosrow Āqā *ḥammām* (bath) at Isfahan, which had been restored only a few years earlier; and the Sardar-e Dīvān-ḵāna at Kāšān. The revolutionary habit of turning the [Friday](#) congregational prayer in large cities and on university campuses into opportunities for religious and political propaganda introduced another danger: The need for larger and larger spaces led to major alterations and uncontrolled demolition in historic mosques throughout the country.

In 1362 Š./1983, after some years of official silence on the subject, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Rūḥ-Allāh Ḳomaynī) issued an edict declaring that the artistic and cultural wealth of Persia belongs to the people and must be respected: “Above everything is culture” because it “edifies man, and for this aim the prophets were sent.” Even before the issuing of this edict, however, one brave and authoritative voice of dissent was heard; the reconstituted Sāzmān-e mellī-e ḥefāẓat-e āṭār-e bāstānī-e Īrān published in the first issue of its new journal, the quarterly *Aṭar* (spring 1359 Š./1980), a severe denunciation



of unjustified damages. Under this double impulse restorers (partly trained at the Isfahan and Persepolis workshops) and technical officials of the different regional offices have been dispatched throughout Persia to curb vandalism and to repair, wherever possible, the most serious damage.

A somewhat similar attitude prevailed in the early days of the war with Iraq. After an initial stage in which houses and buildings of some religious, artistic, or historical importance were hastily repaired or damages simply covered over, a more rational attitude developed. Physical damage to the various monuments was not only carefully repaired but also publicized before the national and international communities, totally independent of the emphasis on humanitarian considerations that had prevailed previously. In August 1989, for instance, an estimate of damages to historical monuments in Persia during the war was published by Sāzmān-e mīrāt-e farhangī-e Īrān (Institute for the cultural heritage of Iran) and dispatched all over the world through the various embassies. This document is very useful, though the criteria adopted for assessing the degree of damage are not always consistent. Once more Persian experts on restoration were called upon to exercise their skills, already amply documented at the first international conference on the reconstruction of war-damaged areas held at the University of Tehran in 1986; a second conference was held in January 1991, coincidentally with the beginning of the Persian Gulf war. At the present time all conservation and restoration activities are coordinated by Sāzmān-e mīrāt-e farhangī-e Īrān (former Sāzmān-e ḥefẓ-e banāhā-ye tārikī), which had been transferred to the Ministry of science and higher education (Wezārat-e 'olūm wa āmūzeš-e 'ālī); it also publishes the quarterly journal *Majalla-ye mīrāt-e farhangī*, of which four volumes had appeared by 1371 Š./1992.

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