Published: July 20, 2003
Last Updated: July 2, 2015

SEVRUGUIN, ANTOIN

SEVRUGUIN, Antoin, Armenian–Iranian photographer (b. Tehran, late 1830s; d. Tehran, 1933). Though a Russian subject, he lived most of his life in Persia. He is mentioned as a photographer of some repute in the travel literature of late nineteenth-century Persia, and his name appears in a variety of forms including: Serunian, Segruvian, Sevriogin, Sevrugin, and Sevraguine (C. J. M. Vuurman and Th. H. Martens, p. 15). The imprints which he stamped on the backs of his photographs blended French, Persian, and Russian writing with European and royal Iranian symbols and medals. For a period, these imprints identified Sevruguin in Persian as a "Russian" photographer; yet he later added the epithet "*parvarda-ye Irān*" ("nurtured by Iran") to his Iranian passport (see imprint fig. 2 in Bohrer, p. 35).

Sevruguin's father, Vassil de Sevruguin, of Armenian origin, was a scholar of the orient and a Russian diplomat. His mother, known only as Achin Khanoum, was of Georgian extraction. Both were Russian subjects. They had seven children, all born in Tehran. Although the father was an employee of the Russian government, the family was denied a state pension when he died after a riding accident. Achin Khanoum and the children returned to her native Tbilisi, and shortly afterwards to Akoulis, a smaller and more affordable town. Antoin and his brothers Kolia and Emanuel attended school there, while the eldest brother, Ivan, entered the military academy as a cadet. Later, Ivan was exiled to Siberia for his political activities. This, and the denial of the pension, made the family feel resentful towards Russia.

Antoin decided to return to Tbilisi and continue his studies in painting and

photography. There, he befriended the Russian photographer Dmitri Ivanovich Jermakov (1845-1916). From 1870 Jermakov traveled regularly throughout Persia, producing 127 albums and 24,556 negatives by the time of his last trip in 1915. Sevruguin decided to emulate Jermakov and carry out his own photographic survey of the people, landscape, and architecture of Persia. He persuaded his brothers Kolia and Emanuel, both businessmen in Baku, to accompany him. Around 1870, they traveled with a large caravan to Persia and took pictures in Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, and Luristan. Finally, they went to Tehran where Sevruguin met and married Louise Gourgenian who came from an old Iranian-Armenian family. They had seven children together (Olga I, Olga II, Mary, Alexander, André, Ivan, and Mikhail).

Sevruguin's reputation as a portrait photographer soon came to the attention of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896), who appointed him as one of the official court photographers. Prominent courtiers and notables in Tehran and elsewhere also commissioned Sevruguin to take their portraits. In between taking studio portraits in Tehran, Sevruguin traveled throughout the land to continue his extensive photographic survey of Persia. With the help of armed guards and technical assistants, he photographed landscapes, ancient monuments, and the diverse people of Persia. Over time, he developed close contacts among the various tribal chieftains, "many of whom were his clients and guests when they came to Tehran and with whom he would exchange gifts for Nowruz, the Iranian New Year" (C. J. M. Vuurman and Th. H. Martens, p. 26). They also offered him protection while he was on expeditions during periods of unrest among the southern tribes.

Sevruguin also traveled back and forth to Europe, trying to keep in touch with the latest innovations in photography. He won two medals at international photography exhibitions (Brussels, 1897 and Paris, 1900) and the pictures of the two medals were added to the imprints that he stamped on the back of his photographs. Nāṣer-al-Din Shah also conferred the title of "khan" upon Sevruguin, who was known henceforth as "Āntovān Ḵān" in Persia.

Sevruguin had also established a photographic studio in ʿAlā-al-Dawla Street (later Ferdowsi Avenue), near Żahir-al-Dawla's residence (Afshar, p. 272). Many years later, during Moḥammad-ʿAli Shah's reign (1907-1909), when the residence was looted at the time of the bombardment of the Parliament in 1908, the studio was also broken into and although Sevruguin's family survived the unrest and took refuge in the British embassy, much of his work was destroyed in the turmoil. Of his more than seven thousand glass plates,

only two thousand could eventually be retrieved and restored. After the fall of the Qajar dynasty, the surviving glass plates were confiscated by Rezā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41), who found many of the images unpalatable, depicting as they did figures from the old regime as well as conditions far removed from his own notions of a modern westernized nation.

During the last few years of his life, Sevruguin's studio was run by his daughter Mary. She was able to recover some of his glass plate negatives, perhaps through her friendship with Moḥammad Rezā Shah (r. 1941-79). Sevruguin died of a kidney infection in his late nineties and was buried in the family tomb in Tehran.

Of the more than 7,000 glass-plate negatives that Sevruguin made, only 696 have survived. These remaining negatives were eventually bequeathed to the American Presbyterian Mission in Tehran. It is not known when or by whom these negatives were donated, but they were purchased for two hundred dollars by the Islamic Archives established by Myron Bement Smith in 1951-52, and were eventually donated to the Smithsonian Institution where they are now housed in the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Archives (Ballerini, pp. 99-117).

Some of Sevruguin's photographs have appeared, usually without acknowledgement, in the published travelogues of several European travelers to Persia, including those by Sir Percy Sykes and his sister, Ella (Navab, p. 113, footnote 1). Sevruguin constructed harem scenes and other such Western fantasies of the East within his own studio, and often photographed archeological sites, tribal and occupational types, and so on. Thus, in the words of Ali Behdad, Sevruguin "contributed to what we may call the 'photographic discourse of Orientalism'" (Behdad, 1999, p. 86). Sevruguin's multicultural perspective, which bridges East and West, can be compared with that of other Armenian photographers of his time, such as the famous Abdullah Frères (formerly Abdullahian) of Istanbul (Navab, pp.132-134). He was also deeply immersed in Persian culture and knew long stretches of Persian verse by heart. "His favorite occupations, next to photography, were his own painting and the study of traditional Persian painting. He devoted time to the work of miniaturists, as well as to European painting,"(C. J. M. Vuurman and Th. H. Martens ,p. 26).

Through photography, Sevruguin wrote his own story within Iran's other stories. The effort to construct identity within representation was something

he negotiated and articulated through his photographs. The relations between subjects in Sevrugin's photographs were neither dominating nor aggressive; on the contrary they were transgressive and multi-directional. He photographed to ask questions. He moved beyond simply taking pictures of scenes and types of the East for a Western audience, to making perceptive portraits that pushed his art to the edge of things. In a subtle way, he used a Western convention to critique the complicated web of relations between East and West; a relationship in which he was always doubly implicated. His art, his identity, his life became intermingled with the complexity of Iran of his time. In Sevruguin's photographs, we are faced with images overflowing with the creative efforts of an ambivalent consciousness, living and working between cultures, feeling both rooted and uprooted in Iran. The resulting photographs depict neither East nor West, but a hybrid culture in between. Sevruguin assembled the intersections of different histories and memories. He joined them in a way which allowed them to cross paths and meet at some points and not at others, but with neither one erasing the other. His art invites us to imagine an alternative practice for collective human existence which leaves coercion outside the frame.

Figure 1. Antoin Sevruguin. Self-Portrait at Naqsh-i-Rustam, ca. 1900. Modern gelatin silver print from glass photonegative. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Myron Bement Smith Collection.

Figure 2. Antoin Sevruguin. Persepolis, Colossi of the Porch of Xerxes, ca. 1900. Modern gelatin silver print from glass photonegative. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Myron Bement Smith Collection.

Figure 3. Antoin Sevruguin. Dr. Nūr Moḥammad (a Jewish doctor), ca. 1880. Modern gelatin silver print from glass photonegative. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Myron Bement Smith Collection.

Figure 4. Antoin Sevruguin. Interior in Golestān Palace, ca. 1890. Modern gelatin silver print from glass photonegative. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Myron Bement Smith Collection.

Figure 5. Antoin Sevruguin. Barber Dyeing Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's Mustache, ca.

1890. Modern gelatin silver print from glass photonegative. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Myron Bement Smith Collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Charyar Adle, with coll. by Yaḥyā Ḏakā (Yahya Zoka), “Notes et Documents sur la Photographie Iranienne et son Histoire,” *Stud.Ir.* 12/2, 1983, pp. 249-80.

Iraj Afshar, “Some remarks on the early history of photography in Iran,” in Edmund Bosworth and Carole Hillenbrand, eds., *Qajar Iran: Political, social and cultural change, 1800-1925*, Edinburgh, 1983, pp. 261-82; also one photograph with his imprint on the back (Plates 12).

Julia Ballerini, “Passage: Studio to Archive to Exhibition,” in F. N. Bohrer, ed. *Sevruguin and The Persian Image*, Washington D.C., 1999, pp. 99-117.

Ali Behdad, “Sevruguin: Orientalist or *Orienteur*?” in F. N. Bohrer, ed. *Sevruguin and The Persian Image*, Washington D.C., 1999, pp. 79-98.

Idem, “The Power-ful [sic] Art of Qajar Photography: Orientalism and (Self)-Orientalizing in Nineteenth –Century Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 34, 2001, pp. 141-51.

Frederick Bohrer, ed., *Sevruguin and The Persian Image, Photographs of Iran, 1870-1930*, Washington D.C, 1999.

Barjesteh van Waalwijk van Doorn and Gillian M. Vogelsang-Eastwood, eds., *Sevruguin’s Iran*, Tehran, 1999.

Yaḥyā Ḏakā, *Tāriḵ-e ʾakkāsi wa ʾakkāsān-e pišgām dar Irān*, Tehran, 1997.

Aphrodite Désirée Navab, “To Be or Not to Be An Orientalist?: The Ambivalent Art of Antoin Sevrugin,” *Iranian Studies* 35, 2002, pp. 113-44.