

Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar: The Artist and the Shah: Memoirs of life at the Persian court

Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar's study is an extraordinary achievement. On the basis of less than a hundred and fifty pages of Persian text, written more than sixty years ago, he has created a work of meticulous, painstaking scholarship, whilst at the same time revealing in a highly readable and accessible way a remote, unfamiliar world with great sympathy and understanding. Piecing together the reminiscences of the descendant of a family who were associated with high office from the beginning of Qajar rule, he translates in the first part of these memoirs the thoughts and feelings of the last in the long line of the Mo'ayyer al-Mamalek family, as he looks back over the events of his life from his birth in 1876 to the time that he wrote these pages in the late 1950s. It is not a structured memoir, based on journals and documents, but a more immediate, personal recollection, touching on what at the moment occurred to him, remembering close family relationships, the deep love for his mother and his second wife, his teachers, the months spent in Paris in 1900 where he was photographed by Nadar, the cholera epidemics of 1892 and 1904, his experiences at the time of the Constitutional Revolution, amongst much else of importance in his work as an artist and in his personal life. Always in the background is heard the wistful lament for the dissipation of the great wealth he and his father had inherited, the grand palaces, the gardens, summer retreats, and hunting grounds, all lost or much diminished. In the longer second part of his memoirs, the focus is switched to Dust-Ali Khan's personal experience of the court of Naser al-Din Shah in the last decade of the nineteenth century. As a favourite grandson, he had unusual access and he describes the personality of the Shah, his wives, the buildings, the ceremonies and customs of the court, festivals, other royal palaces, and the hunting expeditions, in precise detail and from a perspective that few had known.

Besides this attractive and accurate translation from the Persian original, Manoutchehr Eskandari-Qajar has in a wonderfully illuminating introduction placed the life of Dust-Ali Khan in a wider familial and historical context. To this and the two parts of the memoirs, he has added nearly two hundred pages of notes, incorporating meticulous explanations and details, discussions of the historical controversies, the latest research and its bibliography, as well as appendices of the family trees of different branches of the Qajar family. By doing so he has transformed the scale of this study into a significant contribution to the scholarship of the period and created a valuable book of reference. Another unusual dimension is that throughout the book he has included two hundred and eighty-one photographs, drawn from a wide range of private and family photographic collections, illustrating the people, buildings, places, and events central to Dust-Ali Khan's life. The effect is that the world described here in words is also brought vividly to life by a visual presence. It is as if the annotated photographs prompt the memories in the written text, a dialogue between camera and pen. It is especially the women of the close family who no longer remain lifeless names on the page, but now acquire a personality of their own as we follow them through the decades, in the same way as the aging features of Dust-Ali Khan himself reflect the passage of time with a certain lingering melancholy. It might have been an oppressive awareness of the vicissitudes of fate and a feeling of awe at the disappearance of this vanished world that underlies the tense, puzzled expression of the young Forugh Farrokhzad, the poet and feminist icon, who in 1960 is photographed concentrating intently as Dust-Ali Khan describes the distant past of

his childhood, already a world unimaginable for her. How much more so sixty years later, yet now sensitively recreated for us in this beautifully produced and fascinating study.

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