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Museumsinsel Berlin, Pergamonmuseum

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Iran. Moving into Modernity

5 May – 30 June 2017

A presentation by the Museum für Islamische Kunst – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in cooperation with the Culture Department of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The presentation at the Buchkunstkabinett of the Pergamonmuseum depicts the many facets of nineteenth-century Iran through photographs, artworks, and historical postcards. The display illustrates how Iranian society originally interpreted modernity by balancing between tradition and innovation. Photography played an important role in this process. The exhibition is organised in collaboration with the National Archives of Iran, Tehran.

During the nineteenth century Iran played a key role in the complex diplomatic and military scenario of the Near East and Central Asia and underwent at the same time rapid socio-cultural changes. Between 1785 and 1925 the country was ruled by the Qajar dynasty, a royal family descending from a warrior tribe of Turkic origin. During their reign the Qajar Shahs represented themselves as both legitimate heirs of the ancient history of Iran and modernising reformers. In this process the new technology of photography played a significant role.

Photographic cameras arrived in Iran in the early 1840s. Soon they were used to create a unique image of power and modernity within and outside the state borders of Qajar Iran. Embraced by the Shahs, photography quickly became the favourite medium of political propaganda. It was also widely employed to visually map the territories under Qajar rule as the court launched several photographic missions to document the historical past of Iran as well as the diversity of its modern population. Photography captured changes in nineteenth-century Iranian society such as in city architecture, in clothing, and in lifestyle. By the end of the century photography turned into a fashionable product and a status-symbol for Iranian urban elites and the bourgeoisie. Between 1905 and 1911 the political movement known as Iranian Constitutional Revolution used photographs and postcards with short texts to support its requests for governmental reforms and to publicise its leaders.

Together with historical photos from the National Archives of Iran, the exhibition curated artworks and historical postcards from a private collection.

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