

Uncovering layers of history in Isfahan

Iranica Desk

Earlier this year, an archaeologist, Aqil Aqili, reported the destruction of historical layers in the project of leveling the Kamar-Zarrin passageway with Jelokhan Square in Isfahan, and announced that the laws passed by the Parliament have been violated by the city's municipality.

Fortunately, as a result of the efforts made by cultural heritage enthusiasts, this project was halted, and afterwards, the first phase of archaeological excavation operations began in the area. Aghili stated that many parts of this site have been lost, but hopefully, by preserving what is now being discovered at the passageway, some of the damages caused by negligence in the past 20 years can be compensated, ISNA wrote

Ali Shojaei Esfahani, heading the team of archeologists working in the area, said that architectural remains and artifacts, dating back to early Islamic to Qajar and Pahlavi eras were unearthed during the excavations carried out in the region.

He said, "We have kept the site open to the public for visits since the beginning of the project to pursue two objectives: first, to raise society's awareness of the passageway, and second, to enhance people's knowledge of archaeological studies. Some individuals believe that certain archaeologists are primarily seeking to uncover treasures and buried antiquities."

He added that although it is not common in archaeological

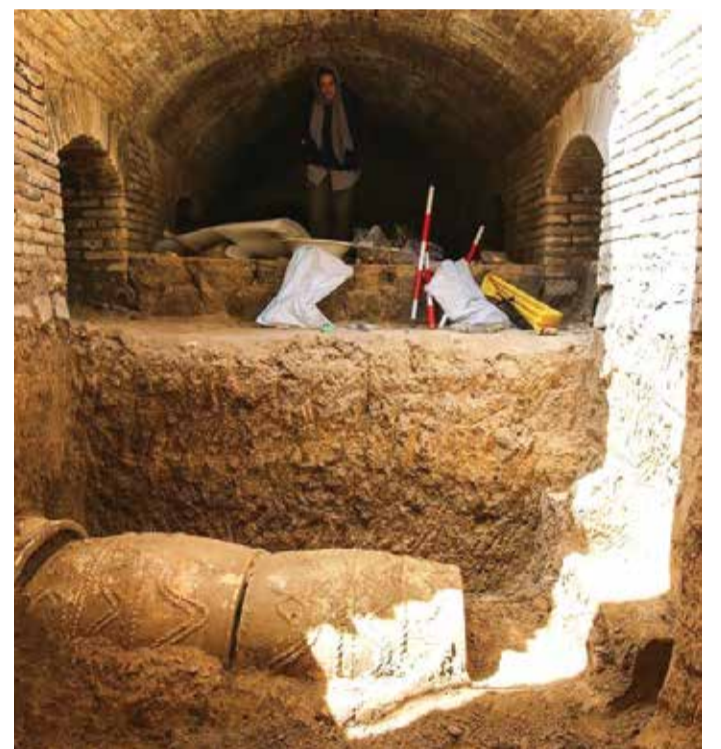
projects, people are allowed to visit the site and take photos. Moreover, groups of school students have visited the area to familiarize themselves with archaeological studies and activities related to the cultural heritage sector.

Shojaei noted that the excavations reveal historical layers buried beneath the city of Isfahan, emphasizing the importance of preserving them for recognition and study. He mentioned that the project, known as urban archaeology, is currently ongoing in a significant part of the city in collaboration with Isfahan Municipality, the provincial Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicraft Organization, and the Cultural Heritage Research Centre.

He highlighted that the remaining excavations are planned to be conducted after obtaining extended permission from relevant authorities, with the expectation of establishing a museum site in the area.

He remarked that the artifacts unearthed in the area, such as raw materials, finished products, and waste materials, vividly indicate that the central district of Isfahan surrounding Jaame Mosque was bustling and densely populated. Considering Isfahan's designation as the Creative City of Handicrafts, these new discoveries hold significant importance.

Fortunately, the architectural remnants remain in their original locations, he said, adding efforts are underway to put them on public display in cooperation with Isfahan University of Art and other related organizations.



IRIB NEWS

Influence of reproductions on art perception and scholarship

Although there is little reason to deny that true familiarity with artefacts can only be attained through examining them in their tangible reality, we also have to admit that many works of art we know through reproductions only and that reproductions remain the most effective means for spreading knowledge about them. Yet despite the decisive epistemic status of illustrations, they themselves rarely become the subject of analysis and much of the indirect information which they might convey is glossed over.

Acting as transparent windows to the originals, their intermediary existence — which has been realised, studied and exploited by modern artists for over a century — is usually denied by scholars.

This negligence characterizes authors, editors and readers of scientific publications alike. Reproductions began to appear alongside the first scientific publications on art in order to present previously unseen artefacts to the audience, or, more specifically, to underpin the written argument. Some of the authors of these early publications were very careful about the quality and supportive value of their illustrations, but even they often forgot to give due recognition to the authors of the images, like Fried-

rich Sarre (1865-1945) in the case of Antoine Sevruguin (c. 1838-1933) or Joseph Strzygowski (1862-1941) in that of Rudolf-Ernst Brunnow (1858-1917), as mentioned elsewhere in this book. Rarer was K. A. C. Creswell (1879-1974)'s type of Islamic art historian who ensured the consonance between his texts and images by being the author of both.

An extreme case of this latter type is represented by Ernst Herzfeld

(1879-1948) who effectively forbade visitors of Persepolis to take photographs in "his" site, as if being a descendant of the Achaemenids.

It was not chiefly the ownership of photographs these scholars were wary of, but rather the risk of losing their hardly-won exclusive access to the subjects depicted in the images and the consequent loss of control over academic discussion— photographs are likely to become public,

spread, and start a life of their own.

This shows an indirect admission of the power of illustrations, namely that reproductions — and other displays, including exhibitions — are no less effective instruments in shaping public appreciation of a particular artistic heritage than texts. The latter would lose credibility and testability without images. One may not forget how much of knowledge depends on the mere availability of visual material. It may seem banal but worth noting that the initial European perception of non-European art was largely determined by the incalculable supply of artefacts on the market and in collections. It appears likewise that a great deal of early scholarship of Persian art relied on limited visual resources. Entire theories could be built on the thin basis of a single collection or publication, and these naturally led to distorted perceptions which would remain persistent despite the gradual emergence of new visual aids.

Several early publications had to do entirely without illustrations. Some of the authors, determined to promulgate Persian art, were well aware that real knowledge cannot emerge without direct contact with the sources. Some were condemning

those who ignored even the few available information supplies and created untrue impressions of non-European art as a result.

Although photography cannot be uncritically equated with scientific neutrality in the process of visual transmission, it became by far the most accepted form of pictorial reproduction of artefacts during the 20th century. This was because the insertion of etchings or lithographs in 19th-century publications doubtlessly added an extra link to the already long and subjective chain between the original artefact and the viewer, thus it hindered rather than fostered direct encounters.

As late as 1895, the first monograph about Persian art, *L'Art Persan* by Albert Gayet (1856-1916), employed engravings side by side photographs of paintings. Some paintings are in fact Indian which Gayet could not always distinguish from their Persian counterparts.

The original paintings once again came without exception from a single collection, this time the Khedivial Library of Cairo. Considering his decades-long activity in Egypt—as opposed to his relative unfamiliarity with Persia — this choice is understandable.



The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter titled, 'The mediation of photography: Persian paintings in European printed books and journals', from a book titled, 'The Shaping of Persian Art: Collections and Interpretations of the Art of Islamic Iran and Central Asia', edited by Yuka Kadoi and Iván Szántó and published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.