

HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

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Questionnaire Response

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About the Author

Sahar Hosseini is an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh's department of History of Art and Architecture. As an architectural and urban historian, she studies the socio-cultural conditions of societies by looking at the places they create, inhabit, and modify. Her scholarship focuses on the built environment and material culture of the pre-modern Muslim world, particularly positioning the Persianate societies at the intersection of global flows, local practices, and the natural context of each region.

Questionnaire

Response

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Confined at home at a time when the pandemic has imposed unprecedented limits on our mobility and heightened our awareness about the now-lost advantages of ready access to books and archives, trips to research sites, and spontaneous encounters with colleagues, reflecting on mobility is truly a timely exercise. In the field of art history, the last few decades have evidenced a growing interest in mobility and contact, a productive undertaking especially as the field continues its attempt to escape national parameters and expand its focus

beyond “fine arts” and “masterpiece culture” to “artifacts” and “material culture.” The growing number of publications in this area confirms the rising interest in the circulation of objects and their multiple lives, meanings, and interpretations as they moved within the mercantile and diplomatic nexuses that connected Asia, Africa, and Europe even prior to the nineteenth-century boost in global mobility.

My work on the early modern Persianate world is attentive to internal mobilities that connected West and South Asia as well as to the network that linked cities of the Persianate world to Europe and Africa. Seventeenth-century Isfahan, the subject of my ongoing research, operated within such a web that facilitated movement of merchants, diplomats, and missionaries between major cities of the early modern world. I engage with this heightened level of mobility, while putting it into conversation with the natural environment of the locale, social formation of space, modes of mobility, and discussions of center/periphery.

At the outset, the immobile nature of the built environment and landscape establishes the basis for my approach to mobility. My work is, therefore, less concerned with the trajectory of the life of artifacts as they cross political and cultural borders; rather, I am more interested in the ways in which mobile actors participate in the formation of new visual and material cultures. For example, I am currently looking into the import of mirrors from Venice and the impact it had on the architectural culture of seventeenth-century Isfahan, including the proliferation of mirror decorations in royal and elite structures of the period—traces of which can be found in structures such as Chehel Sotun Palace (c. 1647) (Fig.1). Furthermore, architecture’s reliance on local materials and the immediate natural environment, especially prior to the technological revolution of the nineteenth century, demands that we consider these mobile forces in relation to natural systems and local architectural conventions. A case in point is the seemingly abrupt appearance of wooden palatial structures (*talars*) and structural/decorative elements that developed into an essential part of the imperial architectural repertoire of Safavid Isfahan (Figs. 2 & 3)—a phenomenon that is hard to explain within the framework of stylistic influence or evolution of style. I contend that the development of technical knowledge and highly skilled wood-craftsmanship in a region where wood was scarce and had no place in vernacular architectural practices, cannot be explained without acute attention to the broader pattern of forced and voluntary migration the Safavids activated at the turn of the seventeenth century. Shah Abbas I’s (1571–1629) success in the Caucasus and his forced-migration policies brought large groups of people into the Caspian and Isfahan regions—the two areas that became new sites of royal investment. While further research is required, juxtaposing local materials as well as construction and decorative conventions in Caucasus, along with the pattern of population movement, helps us offer a plausible explanation for the development of this new structural and decorative program.

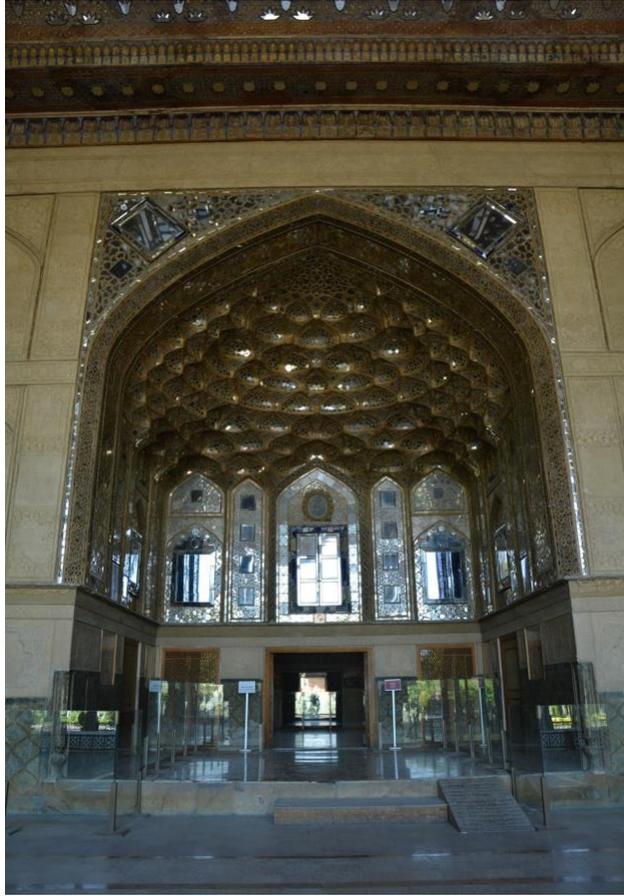


Figure 1

Though not the earliest or best example, mirror decoration on the entrance to the Chehel Sotun Palace (C. 1647) is one of the few cases that are still extant. Photo: Author.



Figure 2

Ali Qapu palace (*talar* added in 1643/44) is one of the two surviving examples of *talar*-fronted palaces that combined masonry architecture with hypostyle wooden structures that created an open and spacious setting. Photo: Author.



Figure 3

Detail of wooden columns and wooden decorations in the *talar* of Chehel Sotun Palace. Photo: Author.

Space is another concept I engage when looking at a cosmopolitan city like seventeenth-century Isfahan. Increasingly, the imposed restrictions associated with this pandemic and our growing reliance on virtual space underscores the centrality of “space” in maintaining and facilitating human interaction. Whereas multi-continental transportation corridors facilitated the movement of people, goods, and ideas, contact and exchange often took place within the confines of cities, modifying and shaping their urban topographies. I ask, what kinds of spaces emerged when people of diverse cultures and backgrounds inhabited the city? What new buildings and structures were developed to accommodate people, practices, and artifacts that arrived in the city? How did social and power relationships materialize as spatial orders? For example, in seventeenth-century Isfahan, spaces of Armenian rituals—especially those dedicated to the festival of Epiphany—emerged as intriguing sites of interaction between the immigrant Christian community and Muslim population of the city, who often joined as bystander spectators. The change in location and visibility of the festival over the course of the seventeenth century speaks to the shifting status of the Armenian community and their power relationship with the Safavid state.

For art historians, discussion of mobility in the premodern world has been primarily interwoven with issues of trade, war, diplomatic mission, and migration. However, concentrating on these issues, which are defined around the norms of settled urban life, marginalizes other modes of mobility that operate outside the field’s focus on trade and political exchange. How should we conceptualize the built environment and landscape in societies for whom mobility is intrinsic? What happens when the mobility of the court is entangled with political legitimacy and practices of kingship? What ramifications do such considerations have for the flow of people and goods between the empire’s center and its peripheries? It is within this context that I explore mobility as it manifests in the network of royal establishments that dotted the geography of the Safavid empire. Indeed, mobility of the court impacted the temporal landscape of the capital as well as physical settings, decorative programs, and the spatial configuration of royal complexes that accommodated the theater of power.

Furthermore, the relationship between center and periphery extends into my work on global contemporary urban landscapes. Whether examining urban built environments shaped by immigrants who are often at the margins of large global economies of American cities, or exploring the contribution of Western-trained architects and planners in the cities of the Global South, the mobility of these actors is central to the development of new forms, spaces, and urban identities. I am particularly interested in ways in which examining the built environment and spaces that are developed in this process can complicate the narrative of outward diffusion of form, style, and ideas from the center, and make visible the active participation and contribution of forces that originated in the peripheries. For example, my collaborative work on immigrant foodscapes of Ironbound Neighborhood (Newark-New Jersey) reveals the active participation of immigrant population, and the culture and skills they bring from their home countries, in shaping the landscape of American cities.¹ Elsewhere, while examining the legacy of the United States’s Point Four aid program on the discourse of urban planning in mid-twentieth century Iran, I highlight the active role of local actors who, despite a persistent presence in the field, are often absent from the archive.²

Ultimately, for me, attention to flow and movement is most productive when the macro-horizontal view of the network of mobilities is combined with micro-vertical research that is guided by the specifics of each place. In this context, Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s term

¹ “Ferry Street,” Ironbound Foodscapes, accessed December 26, 2020, <https://www.ironboundfoodscapes.com/ferry>

² Sahar Hosseini, “Building Isfahan for Tomorrow: The United States’ Point Four Program and Discourse on Urban Planning in Iran,” in *Architectural Dynamics in Pre-Revolutionary Iran: Dialogic Encounter Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour (Chicago: Intellect & University of Chicago Press, 2019), 113–142.

"connected histories" serves as an appropriate paradigm for reflecting upon the narrative of globalization that positions Europe at the center, and for shifting the conversation from the diffusionist and hierarchical paradigm of "influence" to multidimensional concepts of "contact," "exchange," and "synthesis."³ As we strive to reconceptualize the history of art and architecture along global and nonhierarchical lines, attention to mobility can be a worthwhile undertaking. Such an approach not only breaks free from national constraints, but also challenges the Western/non-Western divide and grants greater visibility to regions that have traditionally been considered peripheral to the conversation.

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³ First proposed in the 1990s, and particularly in his article, "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 3 (1997), 735-62. Subrahmanyam has since employed and expanded the concept of "connected histories" in his examination of South Asia's entanglement with larger Eurasian space during the early modern period. See, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Explorations in Connected History, Mughals and Franks* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); "Holding the World in Balance: The Connected Histories of the Iberian Overseas Empires, 1500-1640," *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 5 (2007), 1359-358. While acknowledging the incommensurability of cultures in different regions and empires of the early modern world, the term offers a productive frame to account for connections and transfers across different cultures.