

UC San Diego

MELA Notes

Title

Reviews

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8d07t564>

Journal

MELA Notes, 97(2)

ISSN

0364-2410

Author

MELA Notes, Admin

Publication Date

2026-09-18

DOI

10.5070/M7.69290

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

***The Master Illustrator of Persian Lithographed Books in the Qajar Period.* By Marzolph, Ulrich, and Roxana Zenhari. Leiden: Brill, 2023. (paperback) ISBN: 9789004471313**

Ulrich Marzolph and Roxana Zenhari's work offers a pioneering exploration of Mirzā 'Ali Qoli Kho'i, one of the foremost illustrators of Persian lithographed books during the Qajar period. By highlighting Kho'i's artistic contributions, this study underscores the pivotal role lithographed books played in shaping Iranian art and culture in the 19th century. The authors challenge long-standing views of Qajar art as merely derivative of European styles, revealing instead the deeply rooted traditions that permeated Persian lithographic illustration.

Historically, Orientalist scholarship often neglected Iran's printing history, dismissing Qajar art as a late development overshadowed by European influence. Printed books, too, were often undervalued, seen as mass-produced objects lacking the artistic uniqueness of manuscripts. Yet, many of these lithographed works have become rare and precious over time, their surviving copies now recognized as vital artifacts of cultural and artistic significance. The illustrations in these books provide invaluable insights into the work of Qajar-era artists, many of whom were involved in diverse media, from tile painting and coffeehouse murals to lacquer work. These artists' contributions to book illustration offer a deeper understanding of the artistic and cultural currents of the time.

Marzolph, a leader in the study of Persian lithographed books, laid the foundation for this field with his earlier work *The Narrative Illustration in Persian Lithographed Books* (Brill: 2001), which remains a key text. His comprehensive research, covering collections from major libraries worldwide, significantly expanded the scope of Iranian studies and has inspired further scholarly inquiry, especially with its translation into Persian (Atf, 2015).

The new book is a collaboration with Dr. Roxana Zenhari, who completed her Ph.D. in Iranian Studies at Georg-August University in 2012. She is the author of *The Persian Romance Samak-e 'Ayyar: Analysis of an Illustrated Inju Manuscript* (Verlag für Orientkunde, 2014), a significant contribution to the study of Persian illustrated manuscripts. Dr. Zenhari's research focuses on the interplay between text and image within the broader cultural and political discourse of Islamic arts.

Building on this groundwork, Marzolph and Zenhari's new collaboration examines the life and works of Mirzā 'Ali Qoli Kho'i (an influential illustrator active between 1846 and 1855) across two volumes:

the first providing context and analysis, while the second features Kho'i's original illustrations, allowing readers to closely engage with his visual legacy. Almost all of the illustrations attributed to and signed by Ali Qoli have been published in the second volume, with some illustrations related to and quoted in the introduction featured in full-page reproductions. While most illustrations have been published at a smaller size, the details remain visible, making these images highly valuable as sources for further research.

The introduction to the first volume provides a historical overview of the Qajar period and early 19th-century Iranian art, challenging the prevailing narrative that Qajar art is of lesser significance. The authors draw attention to the rich artistic traditions that flourished during this period, highlighting the importance of lithographed books in disseminating both knowledge and art. The introduction also sets the stage for future research, offering references and insights into key sources.

The second section of the introduction focuses on Mirzā 'Ali Qoli Kho'i's life and career. Due to the scarcity of historical records, the authors rely on secondary sources and Kho'i's signed works—70 signatures in 40 lithographed materials—to piece together a biography of the artist. This effort to reconstruct Kho'i's life from limited sources is a testament to the authors' meticulous research and dedication to bringing the artist's legacy to light.

The third section presents the primary sources used in the research, including the identified illustrated books. The authors examine the artist's signatures and provide a detailed analysis of his style, identifying key characteristics that help attribute other works to him. This section serves as a valuable tool for future researchers who wish to explore Kho'i's body of work in greater depth.

In subsequent chapters, Marzolph and Zenhari delve into the visual aspects of Kho'i's illustrations, discussing motifs, composition, and innovations that set his work apart. They also explore the sources of inspiration for his illustrations, which include earlier printed images from Iran and India, as well as the preferences of his patrons. Kho'i's ability to combine traditional Persian artistic elements with newer influences demonstrates his unique contribution to the art of the period.

The book concludes with a comprehensive catalog of the books illustrated by Kho'i, listing each book's illustrations along with dimensions and page numbers. This catalog is a valuable resource for

scholars and collectors interested in Persian lithographed books and the work of Mirzā ‘Ali Qoli Kho’i.

One of the standout features of this book is the collaboration between Marzolph and Zenhari, whose combined expertise in folktales, printing history, cultural studies, and art history enriches the research. Their interdisciplinary approach elevates the study, offering readers a multi-faceted understanding of Kho’i’s work. The authors also emphasize the relationship between text and image in lithographed books, encouraging readers to view illustrations in the context of the stories they accompany. This perspective adds a new dimension to the study of Persian lithographed books, highlighting the integral role of illustrations in narrative storytelling.

The authors’ close collaboration with Iranian scholars and access to public and private collections in Iran also enhance the depth and authenticity of the research. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited access to some resources, Marzolph and Zenhari remained dedicated to producing a comprehensive and up-to-date study. Their engagement with newly discovered books and publications underscores their commitment to advancing knowledge in this field.

Mirzā ‘Ali Qoli Kho’i: The Master Illustrator of Persian Lithographed Books in the Qajar Period provides a strong foundation for understanding Kho’i’s contributions to Persian lithographed books, but there are areas that warrant further exploration. The book primarily relies on secondary sources and Kho’i’s signed works, which limits the understanding of his personal and professional life, particularly his relationships with patrons and other artists. Additionally, while Kho’i’s artistic style and its connection to the text are discussed, a deeper exploration of how his illustrations interpreted and enhanced the narrative would be valuable. How Kho’i transformed text into visual imagery, and how this interplay shaped readers’ understanding of the stories, merits more attention. Further comparative analysis with other Qajar illustrators, both within Iran and beyond, could also clarify Kho’i’s specific contributions to the period’s lithographic tradition. Moreover, the book would benefit from a more thorough examination of the broader social and cultural contexts of Kho’i’s work, including the role of patrons in shaping his illustrations and their influence on other art forms like ceramics or textiles. Finally, the discovery of additional lithographed works by Kho’i, especially from regional collections, could provide further insights into his artistic legacy.

By addressing these areas, future research can deepen our understanding of Kho'i's impact on Persian lithography and the way his illustrations interacted with and interpreted textual narratives.

Ultimately, *Mirzā 'Ali Qoli Kho'i: The Master Illustrator of Persian Lithographed Books in the Qajar Period* stands as a landmark contribution to the study of Persian printing and art history. The book sets a high standard for future research on illustrators of lithographed books and provides a model for analyzing the relationship between text and image in Qajar-period art. By focusing on Kho'i, one of the most influential illustrators of the time, Marzolph and Zenhari offer a window into the rich artistic traditions of 19th-century Iran, ensuring that Kho'i's work and the broader significance of lithographed books continue to receive the scholarly attention they deserve. The Persian version of this book is set to be published in 2025 by Varraqaan Publishing House in Iran, expanding its reach to a broader audience interested in Persian art and printing history.

Ali Boozari,
Iran University of Art

Life on Drugs in Iran: Between Prison and Rehab. By
Rahimipour Anaraki, Nahid. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University
Press, 2022. vii + 153 pages. ISBN 978-0815637837
(paperback)

Nahid Rahimipour Anaraki is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. She holds an MA in Sociology from the University of Kerman, Iran, and a PhD in sociology from Memorial University. She has co-authored several articles published in *Quality & Quantity* journal.[\[1\]](#)

This book provides a comprehensive exploration of the landscape of drug abuse and addiction treatment in Iran. It examines the historical and cultural factors that contribute to the context of drug abuse and its social, psychological, economic impact, as well as related family issues. Anaraki, investigates the addiction treatment system from medical and harm reduction programs to criminal justice and correctional services.

The author gained remarkable access to communities, enabling her to document the experiences of current and former drug users in Iran. This allowed her to explore their personal narratives, perspectives, and stories in depth. One of the book's most significant contributions is its discussion of treatment facilities and support systems, which remain difficult to access, particularly for women, due to social stigma and fear of law enforcement.

The book also discusses how harsh policies and intense efforts to control drug supply have inadvertently led to the increased use of harder drugs, such as heroin, which is easier to smuggle compared to opium. Anaraki situates the issue of drug use within the broader context of Iran's severe drug problem, its punitive policies, and the limited availability of treatment or rehabilitation centers. The book begins with a historical overview of drug use in Iran, tracing its roots to opium (*afyūn* or *taryāk*), which was once prevalent across all segments of society, from the governing class to ordinary citizens. Anaraki also addresses social and environmental factors that facilitate criminal behavior, such as familial substance abuse, criminal histories, violence, and poverty.

Participants in her study—substance users who were incarcerated or sent to compulsory camps—often referred to themselves as “us” in contrast to the “others” who are addiction-free. They described experiencing systemic dehumanization, starting with their arrest, confinement in temporary detention centers, and subsequent quarantine periods. Following quarantine, individuals were transferred to group cells, often overcrowded and lacking sufficient food or beds. Some were even subjected to whipping following a positive drug test.

Whether this occurs under the banner of criminalization or disguised medicalization, the state has control and monitors over people who use substances acknowledging them as so-called dangerous or deviant/abnormal class, the author states. Some contradictory policies such as treatment-oriented approaches eventually manipulate the identity of people who use or have used substances to decrease the conflict they experience. They struggle with multiple, contested, or hybrid identities regardless of being in prison or treatment centers. The contested perception of the state and the society biases finally affect the lives of people who are in a recovery or in prison and never allow them to effectively and freely communicate or gain a non-predetermined identity. Wherever they go they are treated as criminals or drug dealers.

The focus on marginalized voices that are often excluded from public discourse makes this research important. However, this selection may not fully represent the scope of drug use within Iran's politically and culturally sensitive context. The demographic and personal characteristics of substance users—such as age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture, or disability—need to be carefully considered in the research.

Although this book offers a compelling exploration of addiction within Iran's unique sociopolitical and governing framework, the role of religion, Islamic values, morality, and state control highlights the complexity of studying addiction in this context compared to countries with more open and modern settings.

The contradictions between punitive and rehabilitative approaches illuminate how structural inequalities, religious values, and state policies intersect to shape the lives of drug users. While the author's focus on institutional settings provides deep insight into formal systems, it leaves informal, community-based, or street-level populations less explored. Nevertheless, Anaraki's work, with its unique perspective and extensive research, makes a valuable contribution to the sociology of addiction and the drug crisis in Iran's complex sociocultural context.

This book is an essential resource for academic libraries with collections focusing on the Middle East, contemporary Iran, political and social issues, and human rights.

Following AI is used for brainstorming on drug use in Iran from: OpenAI. (2024). *ChatGPT* (January 31 v4.0) [Large language model].

<https://chatgpt.com/c/671551f4-84b8-8008-8ab5-5e0f654597bd>

Perplexity. (n.d.). *Homepage*. Perplexity AI. [Large language model].

Retrieved August 21, 2024, from <https://www.perplexity.ai>

[1] Rahimpour Anaraki, Nahid. *Prison in Iran: A Known Unknown*. 1st ed. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-57169-6>.

Shahrzad Khosrowpour
Chapman University

From the Moon to the Well. By Atashparvar, Hossein. Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2024. Xi + 148 pages. ISBN: 9781568594064 (paperback)

In *From the Moon to the Well*, Hossein Atashparvar narrates the story using a mobile, cinematographic perspective and visual surrealism. The text depicts urban exploration as a performative act of witnessing wherein the narrator becomes both observer and participant in the city's ongoing metamorphosis. Drawing from poststructuralist theories of representation, the novel emphasizes surface-level focalization over psychic interiority. This approach aligns with Henri Lefebvre's concept of "lived space,"^[i] wherein the city exists in motion, perception, and evanescent moments of interaction, rather than as a stationary site of ruminations. This rhetoric, from a Foucauldian approach focused on the power relationships in society through urban mobility, suggests that the transformation of a city represents a form of emotional and cultural struggle, rather than solely a physical one.

Atashparvar's novel narrates the city- conceptualized by Michel de Certeau as "spatial dynamics"^[ii] and Henri Lefebvre as "lived space"- as something that refuses to be confined to static conceptual or physical boundaries. This fluidity is evident in landmarks such as Kuh-e Sangi [literally meaning the Stone Mountain] and Edam Square [the Execution Square] formerly Barq Square [Electricity Square]. Mashhad is presented not just as a place to observe, but as a text to be interpreted and lived through. By focusing on the city's physicality, the novel invites readers into urban transformation as both metaphor and reality, mapping it as a site of relentless reinvention.

A Foucauldian analysis situates the narrative within the struggles of individuals resisting a fast-changing social and cultural landscape. Cities are not merely physical entities but a repository of power, memory, struggle, hope, and disappointment. Mashhad serves as a microcosm of broader dynamics within the society, illustrating the complexities of power relationships and the tensions between past and present. *From the Moon to the Well* reveals Edam Square and Kuh-e Sangi as manifestations of these tensions, reflecting historic and modern crossroads.

A central theme of the novel is "unhousedness," a concept that extends the psychological displacement beyond physical relocation to

encompass a sense of alienation within one's own city. The narrator resembles an exile, searching for familiar signs in a city he no longer recognizes. This sense of estrangement is intensified by the destruction of urban symbols and their replacement with new elements. The author describes this process as one of "killing" urban symbols. This detachment negotiates between tradition and modernity, as characters' identities shift in response to tension between a rooted culture and rapid social evolution. This broader negotiation mirrors the changes in urban Iran, caught between modern desires and deeply entrenched cultural and religious practices.

Mashhad's urban transformation is depicted as layered and ever-changing. The city evolves from a traditional backdrop into a chaotic, disordered, and modern character with its own cultural and psychic topography. The shrine of Imam Reza, with its spiritual gravity, and Tehran Street, teeming with life, serve as pivotal icons of unpleasant continuity and change.

This dynamic interplay between city and the narrator's self becomes a central axis of the novel's themes. The text itself transforms into a space of change, conveyed linguistically through evocative imagery that captures the indeterminacy of urban transformation. Imam Reza's shrine and Tehran Street—both iconic and dynamic within the narrative—emphasize this transformation. Expressions such as "overflowing", "roaring", "killing", and "executing" evoke a Deleuzian understanding of space as unstable and in a constant state of becoming, shaped by violence and upheaval.

The text employs a methodological approach to urban experience, emphasizing mobility and surface-level investigation. Cities are depicted as dynamic spaces created at the intersection of memory, identity, and transformation. Atashparvar's metaphor of urban growth as a "misshapen balloon" encapsulates the nonlinear, chaotic nature of modernization, stretching traditional life in unforeseen ways. Here, modernity does not erase the past but forces tradition, despite its static essence, to adapt and survive within new urban realities. By personifying historical landmarks such as the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids of Egypt, Atashparvar portrays memorial spaces as symbols of cultural identity and collective memory, their destruction constituting symbolic violence.

Central to Atashparvar's narrative is the negotiation of identity. By framing urban transformation as a binary between resistance and

oppression, the novel explores cultural hybridity and adaptation. Religious practices coexist with modern aspirations, and threads of resistance are woven into the tapestry of a changing city. Beneath these processes lies a deeper philosophical question: how does one carry history and identity in a world of constant change? What remains of a city when everything has shifted? These questions provide the structural and thematic foundation of the novel, confronting readers with what constitutes a city and a human being amid transformation and uncertainty.

From the Moon to the Well offers an ambiguous understanding of social change. People, city icons, and monuments simultaneously create meaning and provoke disappointment as they grapple with uncertainty because of urban transformation. Change is experienced not as linear development but as a continuous process of reinvention. Interwoven with the story of Mashhad's evolving urban life, Atashparvar reflects on the lives shaped by chaotic social dynamic. The novel transcends its pages, inviting introspection on change, memory, and the adaptation. The Imam Reza shrine and Edam Square stand as powerful symbols of adaptation and remembrance in Mashhad's urban landscape. These landmarks embody the weight of memory while demonstrating the inevitability of change. Each transformation of these spaces tells stories of displacement, loss, resilience, and the continuous process of adaptation experienced by the city's inhabitants.

[i] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

[ii] de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Mehrak Kamali
Ohio State University

Arabic Printing for the Christians in Ottoman Lands: The East-European Connection. Early Arabic Printing in the East. By Feodorov, Ioana. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. xxiv, 466 pages. ISBN 9783110786842 (paperback)

Ioana Feodorov is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for South-East European Studies at the Romanian Academy in Bucharest. She is also the Principal Investigator of the TYPARABIC Project series devoted to researching the context and outcome of 18th century Arabic liturgical, theological, and polemical works printed for Arabic-speaking Catholics and Orthodox living in the Ottoman Levant. *Arabic Printing for the Christians in Ottoman Lands* is the first of six volumes in the series printed by De Gruyter.

The book tells the story of the Christian Arabic-speaking scholars of the 18th century who made great efforts to print and circulate books across their communities. Feodorov's analysis of Romania's role in the commencement of Arabic-type printing in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Levant is central to this narrative. She explores the partnership of Antim the Iberian and Athanasios III Dabbas, twice patriarch of Aleppo, from 1701 to 1702 in Romania. She contends that their joint work and the subsequent establishment of printing presses in Levantine cities contributed to modernity's arrival in the Middle East.

In Chapter 1, Feodorov offers a brief history of Arabic books printed in Western and Central Europe before 1700. She chronicles Rome's efforts in the 16th century to print liturgical books for Arabic-speaking Christians in the Levant. Feodorov concludes the chapter with a survey of secondary research on Arabic book printing in Eastern Europe, stating that her book responds to the dearth of information on Romania's connection with Arabic book printing in the Levant.

Chapter 2 shifts focus to Arabic book printing in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire before 1700, noting hesitations and obstacles to the technology's implementation. She expounds on the circulation of Catholic books in the Levant, explaining how this prompted a desire among the Orthodox to print books consistent with their traditions. Feodorov also notes instances of Christians printing Arabic books within the Ottoman Empire but clarifies that book printing using Arabic type did not occur until 1706 in Aleppo.

Chapter 3 provides the background leading up to the pivotal years of 1701–1702 when the collaborative work of Antim and Dabbas produced the first Arabic-type books in Eastern Europe. Feodorov describes the political and religious context that initiated Dabbas's journey to Bucharest, where he acquired the tools, expertise, and financial support needed to establish the first Arabic-type press in the Ottoman Empire in 1706. She also captures the growing tension between Catholics and Orthodox to print and circulate their theological material, culminating in Antioch's division in 1724.

Chapter 4 describes Catholic missionary efforts during the early decades of the 18th century to convince members of the Church of Antioch to align themselves with Rome. She chronicles the pioneering work in Lebanon of Dabbas's apprentice, Abdallah Zahir, whose press she describes as a beacon for Greek Catholics in the Levant. As the distribution of Catholic liturgical and polemical books increased, Feodorov states that the Orthodox saw printing as a way to standardize their liturgical texts and combat the wave of Catholic books circulating in Antioch. She details Patriarch Sylvester's efforts, Dabbas's successor, to relaunch Arabic printing in the Romanian Principalities after the Aleppo press ceased its activities in 1711.

Chapter 5 traces the events that led to the second transfer of printing expertise to the Levant. Access to Arabic type enabled precise translations of Arabic books, improving the ability of Antiochian Church leaders to communicate and defend their theologies to Arabic-speaking Christians. The use of Bucharest-made Arabic type, Feodorov explains, demonstrates Romania's continued connection to the Orthodox Church in the Levant. She concludes the chapter by narrating the journey of Yusuf Mark, a Syrian disciple of Patriarch Sylvester, tasked with learning from Bucharest printers in order to establish the first Arabic-type printing workshop for Orthodox books in Beirut.

Chapter 6 offers lists of Arabic books printed during different periods in Romania, coupled with descriptions of the books' physical appearance and content. She begins with books printed in Wallachia from 1701 to 1702 by Antim and Dabbas. Then, she offers a list and description of the books printed by Dabbas in Aleppo from 1706 to 1711. The chapter's third section highlights books printed by Patriarch Sylvester in Moldavia from 1745 to 1747. The last section concludes with books printed in Beirut after 1750.

Chapter 7 counters the view that the efforts of Antim and Dabbas to print theological books for Arabic-speaking Christians in the 18th century contributed little to modernity's arrival in the Ottoman Levant. She re-emphasizes how Prince Constantin Brancoveanu's financial generosity facilitated this movement and concludes the chapter with a summary of the book's main points.

Chapter 8 offers an addendum about Mihail Stefan, an apprentice of Antim the Iberian. Like Antim, Stefan was Georgian and returned to his homeland to open a printing workshop. Feodorov explains that the workshop functioned until 1722, when the Ottoman conquest of the province suspended the work. After the conquest, she explains how Stefan and his apprentices spread across the Middle East, where they employed their printing skills, thereby conveying Antim's continued and widespread impact.

While not the book's objective, readers gain much insight into the Catholic-Orthodox tension and how they periodically requested Ottoman authorities to intervene on their behalf. Such tensions, understandably, are often depicted with scathing cynicism, but Feodorov's gracious description of the conflict as the employment of printed material to offer spiritual guidance to their respective flocks is a refreshing approach.

Feodorov is thorough in her narration, though at times, her thoroughness expands beyond what her subsections' titles indicate. Where this occurs, the flow of her narration, at least for someone outside the field, is challenging to follow. Nevertheless, she accomplishes her objective of narrating the efforts of Arabic-speaking Christians to print and circulate books in the Ottoman Levant. The numerous archival documents she uses demonstrate the Romanian Principalities' central role in these efforts. This book is a must-read for those seeking to understand Romania's contribution to Arabic printing in the Levant.

H. Morgan Nix
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The Wonder of the World: Travel Journals of Hajj Sayyāh in the U.S. (1874–1875). Edited, Translated and Introduced by Ali Ferdowsi. Stockholm: Bunyād-i āyandah nigārī īrān, 2022. 228 pages + 14 pages of images. ISBN 989198751529 (paperback).

Mirza Mohammad Ali Mahallati (ca. 1836-1925), better known as Hajj Sayyāh, was the first Iranian to acquire U.S. citizenship. That he also recorded his experiences in a travelogue during his time in America is nothing short of a historical treasure — a document that, for decades, was presumed lost and remained unknown to scholars and the public alike. While his travel accounts of Iran and Europe had long been accessible, his American journal remained elusive. Thanks to Ali Ferdowsi, this invaluable work is now available for the first time in a carefully prepared bilingual edition, accompanied by rigorous scholarly apparatus and rich contextual materials.

The Wonder of the World begins with a preface by Ferdowsi, followed by an extensive introduction that situates Hajj Sayyāh's journey within broader historical, political, and intellectual contexts. The edited Persian text of the travelogue occupies pages 65–144 and is supplemented by detailed footnotes providing historical background, explanations of terminology, discussions of issues mentioned by Sayyāh, and alternate readings from the original manuscript.

A visual section follows, containing fourteen pages with twenty-six historical images sourced from the Library of Congress and other archival collections. These images provide visual correspondence to the people, places, and themes of Hajj Sayyāh's narrative. After the image section, the bilingual structure continues with an English translation of the entire travelogue, spanning another eighty-four pages and prefaced by Ferdowsi's introduction for English readers.

Ferdowsi's editorial work is meticulous — especially in contextualizing and elaborating on Sayyāh's experiences. However, the edition would have been further strengthened by including reproductions of selected manuscript pages and a fuller description of the manuscript's physical attributes, provenance, and transmission history.

Notably, Ferdowsi's preface goes beyond editorial framing. It presents an incisive philosophical reading of Sayyāh's travel as a

purposeful, ethical act — a true “*siāḥat*” — distinct from exile, migration, or tourism. Ferdowsi underscores that Sayyāh’s travels were inseparable from a duty to return and report to a yet-to-be-realized Iranian modern nation-state. He also highlights the silent but pervasive influence of the trauma of Amir Kabir’s murder as a historical rupture shaping Sayyāh’s existential mission.

The surviving portion of Hajj Sayyāh’s travel notes mainly covers his experiences from Washington, D.C., to Missouri. Sayyāh documents an impressive array of visits and meetings:

- In Washington, D.C., he tours the Smithsonian Museum, the U.S. Mint, the Observatory, and the Capitol, and meets major figures like General Albert Pike and King Kalākaua of Hawaii.
- He gives a public lecture at the Reading Room and is formally received by President Ulysses S. Grant at the White House, where his request for U.S. citizenship is granted.
- Sayyāh then travels south through Richmond, Raleigh, Columbia, Montgomery, Mobile, and New Orleans, observing race relations, visiting hospitals, libraries, and interacting with newly emancipated Black citizens.
- On a riverboat up the Mississippi River, he stops at Vicksburg, Memphis, Cairo, and St. Louis, visiting infirmaries, life insurance offices, Jesuit schools, and printing presses, and even encounters a Mormon acquaintance.

Through these experiences, Sayyāh offers keen observations on American technological innovations, public health institutions, education, religious diversity, and political life, all while maintaining a critical and comparative perspective based on his global experiences. His reflections are at once admiring and sharp, capturing both the promises and contradictions of American society.

In Ferdowsi’s reading, Sayyāh emerges as a self-conscious agent of history: not an idle traveler, but a seeker of humanity and freedom. Ferdowsi emphasizes that Sayyāh’s journey was deeply marked by his commitment to *insānīyat* — humanity — rather than narrow nationalism or uncritical Westernization. Sayyāh’s travel was a conscious, arduous quest to discover models for meaningful political reform and personal emancipation. In the United States, he finally encountered what he called “true freedom” — liberty “in meaning, not in form” — a contrast he could not overlook even compared to European countries. His

observations on race, public education, and democracy, although sometimes marred by selective silences about the darker realities of Reconstruction, were profoundly hopeful and strategically oriented toward inspiring reform at home.

Ali Ferdowsi's achievement in this project is threefold: he serves as a critical editor, a historian of both the text and its author, and as a translator. In each of these roles, he has accomplished a great deal. As a critical editor, Ferdowsi provides a carefully reconstructed and annotated text that brings clarity and coherence to a fragmented and draft-like manuscript. As a historian, he draws upon extensive archival research to situate Hajj Sayyah's travels within broader transnational, political, and intellectual histories, offering readers a powerful interpretation of Sayyah's place in both Iranian and global contexts.

Moreover, Ferdowsi offers a philosophical analysis of the very meaning of travel and return, engaging deeply with ideas of historical rupture, universalism, and the construction of modern subjectivity. He situates Sayyah's mission in continuity with the trauma of Amir Kabir's murder and the larger cultural crisis of nineteenth-century Iran, reading Sayyah as a "founder" of a modern Iranian self.

Ferdowsi also sheds light on Sayyah's likely affiliation with Freemasonry, interpreting subtle clues and symbolic language without overstatement. This insight frames Sayyah's engagement with a global network of liberal ideals in a period of profound political ferment.

Finally, as a translator, Ferdowsi succeeds in rendering Sayyah's Persian prose into clear, engaging English without sacrificing the flavor of the original. His deep sensitivity to language, history, and politics ensures that this volume is both a reliable scholarly edition and an accessible, compelling narrative for general readers.

Ali Ferdowsi, who has made this significant recovery and publication possible, is Emeritus Professor of History and Political Science at Notre Dame de Namur University in California. His other notable contributions include Persian translation of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and critical editions of Hafez's *Ghazals* and *Intellectuals and the Public Space*.

The Wonder of the World is not merely a historical curiosity; it is a profound and moving narrative of cross-cultural engagement, political awakening, and the human yearning for dignity and justice. Through Ferdowsi's careful editorial, historical, philosophical, and translational

work, Hajj Sayyāh emerges as a visionary figure whose observations on America remain surprisingly relevant — and whose dream of freedom, equality, and reform remains unfinished. Ferdowsi's preface, far from being a simple introduction, offers a compelling meta-historical meditation on Sayyāh's journey as a foundational moment in the formation of Iranian modernity — a testimony born of trauma, hope, and an unyielding commitment to *insānīyat*.

This volume is highly recommended for inclusion in Middle Eastern Studies library collections. It offers unique documentation of 19th-century Iranian encounters with the United States, rich philosophical and political commentary, and a rare example of early Iranian diasporic writing. Its bilingual format, critical apparatus, and accessible translation make it valuable not only for researchers, but also for use in graduate seminars and undergraduate courses on Iranian history, travel writing, or global modernity. Furthermore, this book opens a vital window onto an early and largely forgotten encounter between Iran and America, and onto the struggles for liberty that continue to define both societies.

Mahdi Ganjavi
University of Toronto