

Abstract

During the nineteenth century, Persia participated in several world fairs, but it was the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle that marked a pivotal moment in its presence at this global event. General Antoine Kitabgi Khan, an Armenian-Ottoman trader, broker, and director general of customs, served as Persia's commissioner at this exhibition. He was renowned for his role in securing concessions for European financiers in Iran during the late 19th century. Following several failures, his last and most significant concession, D'Arsy's oil concession, was achieved shortly after the exhibition in Paris. This research delves into the process of organizing Persia's pavilion and deciphers the significance of its exterior and interior decorations, shedding light on how Kitabgi leveraged this exhibition to advance his path toward a concession that reshaped Iran's 20th-century trajectory and led to the formation of one of the world's largest oil companies: British Petroleum.

This research reveals that Kitabgi's strategic use of the exhibition was an interplay of art, politics, and economics where a pavilion became a political statement and a catalyst to secure the concession. At the heart of his vision for the exhibition lay a carefully orchestrated design strategy for the pavilion, and smart use of media as a propaganda machine. The interior that Kitabgi curated was a remarkable embodiment of his multifaceted role as a skilled negotiator where he utilized art objects and poetry to bridge the gap between the new king of Persia and potential European investors as both sides of the upcoming concession. Furthermore, he demonstrated his capability to achieve the impossible by displaying prohibited art objects in the pavilion. Kitabgi's role in collecting Persian antiques for the exposition opens new horizons for understanding how the world fairs facilitated the exportation of Iranian cultural materials in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.