

# The Story of a Picture

## Shiite Depictions of Muhammad

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Shiite Muslims in Iran have a very lively tradition of depicting members of the Prophet's family and the Prophet Muhammad himself. Since the end of the nineties, popular selling "posters" are printed in Iran showing the Prophet Muhammad as a beautiful young man, with a turban, a tunic slipped from the shoulder and a languorous expression.<sup>3</sup> The Iranian religious "posters" of today are printed by modern processes, which allow countless variations through the use of paintings, photographs, drawings, or a collage of various images and techniques. Even if the technique is modern, the representation remains traditional: the background is plain-coloured, and the colours are juxtaposed. The images of these venerated persons are depicted with stereotyped features, postures, and attributes that make their identification easier, Ali's double pointed sword for instance.<sup>4</sup>

But the portrait in question today is significantly different from the previous images: it shows a very attractive adolescent, with tender

**In spite of the relative prohibition of graphic representation of living beings, especially members of the Prophet's family,<sup>1</sup> as expressed by religious authorities in the Islamic world, colourful paper prints showing Ali, son-in-law of Muhammad, and his sons Hassan and Hussayn, even the Prophet himself, are not rare in contemporary Iran. In this article the authors tell the story of how a picture of a Tunisian boy became the model for popular selling posters depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a beautiful young man.<sup>2</sup>**

eyes and a delicate face, evoking the mannerism of the late Renaissance, especially the male adolescents painted by Caravaggio, for instance, the *Young Boy Carrying a Fruit Basket* (Roma, Borghese Gallery) or the *Saint John the Baptist* (Capitole Museum); same velvet softness of the cheeks, same half-open mouth, same caressing look. Though there are several variants of the portrait, they all represent the same youthful face, generally identified by the inscription "Muhammad, Allah's mes-

senger" or by a more precise caption referring to an episode of the life of the Prophet and to the supposed origin of the image. We will come back to that later on.

### Surprising discovery

By chance, in 2004 we were able to identify the origin of the Iranian poster image when visiting in Paris an exhibition dedicated to the photographers Lehnert & Landrock. It was a photograph made by Lehnert in Tunisia, probably between 1904 and 1906, and printed and circulated as a postcard in the early twenties.

Originating from Bohemia, Rudolf Franz Lehnert (1878-1948), associated with the German Ernst Heinrich Landrock (1878-1966), settled in Tunisia in 1904, the former as photographer, the latter as manager and publisher. Having sojourned in Tunisia the previous year, Lehnert had been sensitive to the charm of its landscapes and its habitants. The firm (L&L) specialized in picturesque views of Tunisia, later of Cairo and Egypt after the first World War, and in scenes corresponding to an exotic-colonial aesthetic. L&L produced thousands of photographs and postcards of Tunisia, Egypt, and other Near-Eastern countries.

Lehnert, who studied at the Institute of Graphic Arts in Vienna, had ties with the pictorialist movement, which considered photography as a work of art. Lehnert's photographs show not only the desert, rolling sand dunes, picturesque markets, and indigenous areas of old Tunisia, but also the prepubescent, as pubescent girls and young boys, half undressed, posing against the "oriental scenery" of his old Tunisian palace. With their graceful look of an age that hesitates between childhood and adolescence, between feminine and masculine, these boys and girls as pictured by Lehnert corresponded to the tastes of a European clientele, sensitive to Oriental phantasms and seductions. The publication in 1902 of *L'immoraliste* of André Gide is more than a coincidence.<sup>5</sup>

Lehnert has certainly made use of the register of exoticism and of its phantasms, but with great talent. His images were published in argentic prints, in heliogravure, in four-colour process, or hand-painted. Most of the postcards were printed in Germany from 1920 on and distributed from Cairo.

### Matching prints and texts

No doubt that the sepia postcard, number 106 following the numeration of L&L (picture 1) served as model to the Iranian posters. There are traces of sepia visible on some of the Iranian posters. Moreover, the postcard number 106 alone is entitled "Mohamed," which no doubt was one of the reasons why this one was chosen as the prototype for the Iranian portraits. Clearly, the different variants of the Iranian posters all stem from the single postcard number 106; they are all its unmistak-

**Picture 1.**  
**"Mohamed",**  
**postcard**  
**number 106,**  
**by Lehnert**  
**and Landrock.**  
**14 x 8,9 cm**



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able reproduction with the first editions of the Iranian posters being the most similar to the postcard. Unwittingly, Lehnert is at the origin of a kind of mystification, which based on the use, by the Iranian publishers, of an ambiguous and colonial portrait that had been given the name of Mohamed.

The question of the correspondence between the traditional descriptions of the Prophet, the written or oral Traditions, and the image of the young Tunisian boy is open. This postcard shows the portrait of a smiling adolescent, with parted lips, a turbaned head, and a jasmine flower over the ear. The same young boy appears in other postcards coloured or sepia, in slightly different poses, and with different names: Ahmed, Young Arab, Young Arab nomad....

We have not been able to discover the path that lead from the postcard printed in the twenties, to Tehran and Qom where the posters have been published since the beginning of the nineties. But we were intrigued by the question of which idea or evidence could have suggested to the Iranian publishers a shared identity between the Prophet of Islam in his young age and the picture of the Tunisian adolescent?

Already before the First World War, the photograph of "Mohamed" was reproduced, for instance in *The National Geographic Magazine* of January 1914, illustrating an article entitled "Here and There in Northern Africa," with the caption "An Arab and his Flower." In the twenties, the Tunisian postcards of L&L were very popular among the French troops in North Africa and the Levant. Recently, in the eighties and nineties, several books including the portrait of the young adolescent were published, but always with other designations than "Mohamed."

The present Iranian versions, touched up, keep something of the seductiveness of the adolescent, but soften his excessively sensual expression, while trying to reconcile the sacred character of the Prophet to the disturbing beauty of the young man. The left shoulder is lightly covered by a drape, the mouth and gaze have been modified. On several posters, the flowers on the ear are fused with the folds of the turban. By many ways, the Iranian artists tend to erase the feminine tones of the photography of Lehnert or what gives the young man a too sensual a character.

The caption on one of the poster images (picture 2) specifies: "Blessed portrait of the venerated Muhammad, at the age of eighteen during his journey from Mecca to Damascus<sup>6</sup> when accompanying his venerated uncle on a trade expedition. Portrait due to the paintbrush of a Christian priest; the original painting is at present in a 'Muze-i Rum'"<sup>7</sup> In another poster, the designer has touched up the face by adding dimples on the chin of the adolescent; the green-striped turban is held by a green and golden braid. In a poster, dated 2001-2002, lines draw rays illuminating the head of the future Prophet. The mountainous background of another print refers to a later event, when, during the flight from Mecca, Muhammad took refuge in a cave, on whose entrance God ordered a spider to spin a web so as to hide the Prophet from his pursuers.

## Christian origins?

As previously noted, an inscription attributes the work to a Christian origin, and not to an Islamic one, which exculpates the Muslims from the non-observance of the image prohibition and from the sacrilege of representing the Prophet. This attribution also asserts the recognition by the Christians of the sacred character of Muhammad, already in the Prophet's early years.<sup>8</sup> It speaks of a Christian priest, which would appear to be the Nestorian or Orthodox priest Bahira who, according to a story going back to the ninth-tenth century, should have recognized the "Prophet-to-be" by a sign—a mark of prophethood between his shoulders—during his sojourn in Syria. The future Prophet should have said: "When I look at the heaven and the stars, I see myself above the stars," from where the inspiration for the background of some variants showing the vault spangled with stars.

The textual tradition does not say anything on Bahira being a painter. The supposed Christian origin of the portrait refers, perhaps, to another story according to which the Emperor Heraclius of Byzantium (610-641) would have shown to a delegation of Muhammad's companions coming from Mecca the portraits of all the prophets including Muhammad, the last of all prophets.<sup>9</sup>

Even though we have no physical description of Muhammad as an adolescent, there exist descriptions of his features as an adult, transmitted by several sources: he was said to have a white complexion, slightly blushed, black eyes, smooth cheeks, bushy eyebrows in a shapely curve, well sepa-



**Picture 2.**  
Portrait of the young Muhammad. Poster printed in Tehran. 49,5 x 34,5 cm. Bought in Tehran, November 1998.

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rated teeth, and lightly wavy hair. These are also the features of the adolescent on the Iranian posters as well as of many others. It is the portrait of a portrait, a representation of a representation. Thus the Iranian publishers have chosen a model of the Prophet Muhammad representing an ideal of youth, beauty, and harmony.

## Notes

1. Concerning this prohibition, see, among many others, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and The Prohibited in Islam* (Beyrouth, 1984).
2. This article is a revised and summarized version of: Pierre Centlivres et Micheline Centlivres-Demont: "Une étrange rencontre: la photographie orientaliste de Lehnert et Landrock et l'image iranienne du prophète Mahomet," in *Études photographiques* (Paris), no. 17 (2005): 4-15.
3. Oleg Grabar and Mika Natif, "The Story of Portraits of the Prophet Muhammad," *Studia Islamica* (Paris), no. 96 (2003): 35 and Silvia Naef, *Y a-t-il une "question de l'image" en islam?* (Paris: Téraèdre, 2004), 29.
4. Pierre Centlivres et Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries populaires en islam* (Genève: Éditions Georg, 1997).
5. Michel Méglin, "André Gide, Rudolf Lehnert et la poésie arabe. Images et réalité de la pédéastie en terre d'Islam," *Bulletin des Amis d'André Gide* 33 no. 146 (April 2005): 153-178.
6. Twelve years old, following the most frequent Tradition.
7. Rum designates a city of the Christian world, Roma, as well as Constantinople in the past.
8. See A. Abel, "Bahīrah," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd. ed.
9. Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzād of Herāt (1465-1535)* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 245.

Pierre Centlivres, Professor Emeritus of the University of Neuchâtel and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, both anthropologists, are the authors of *Imageries populaires en islam* (Genève: Georg, 1997), and of "Une présence absente: symboles et représentations populaires du Prophète Mahomet," in *Derrière l'image* (Neuchâtel: Musée d'ethnographie, 1998), 139-170.