

## ESSAYS: PHOTOGRAPHY, TRAVEL, AND TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

IN THE SERVICE OF THE EMPIRE: OTTOMAN OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

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The history of Ottoman photography is a subject about which we have come to know quite a lot in the last two or three decades. We know the names and many of the images of some of the commercial photographers active in Istanbul and elsewhere: Ernst Caranza and James Robertson, Abdullah Freres, and Sebah and Joaillier, to mention only a few. We know how Ottoman Turks initially became proficient in photography through the instruction that was offered in the Ottoman military and naval academies. And we are certainly aware of the relationship of Abdülhamid II with photography, and of the numerous albums compiled at his direction, the two sets that were sent to the Library of Congress and the British Library in 1893 and 1894, and those that were kept at the palace, the Yildiz Albums.

The names just mentioned and these basic facts (the presence of European photographers in Istanbul, the training of Ottoman photographers, and the interest of Abdülhamid in photography) as well as the images themselves are a few of the key aspects of the history of Ottoman photography as it has been constructed so far and as it has begun to be cited in various scholarly and popular contexts. (Please see the bibliography for a listing of some important sources for the history of Ottoman photography.) We are indebted for this information to the

careful detective work of a relatively small number of collectors and scholars working in the last few decades.

Given the knowledge that has accumulated as a result of this scholarship, I believe that we can now aspire to a more nuanced and layered view of the place of photography in the Ottoman Empire than has generally been possible so far. Towards that end, I would like to begin with a few observations and questions before moving to an examination of a small selection of photograph albums.

First of all, when we talk about "Ottoman" photography, what exactly does that mean? Is it the photographs that were produced and/or sold within the boundaries of the empire? Is it the work of photographers who considered themselves Ottoman subjects? Or who were residents of the empire? Is it photography that in some subtle or not-so-subtle way conveys qualities of Ottomanness, however that may be defined, or which has some aspect of the Ottoman world as its subject? While it may not be possible or desirable to arrive at a single definition for Ottoman photography, it does seem important to acknowledge that the category we generally accept as a straightforward fact is actually not so clearly delineated.

Second, given the geographic extent of the empire, and the eighty-plus span of years between the invention of photography in 1839 and the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, there are significant and extensive differences in how photography was practiced at different moments and in different places of the empire. It may be convenient to put all of this together under the general heading of Ottoman photography, but it is important to be clear about what period and region of Ottoman photography are under discussion.

Third, what history are we telling? Are we following the development of the careers of specific photographers, or of the establishment of the business or the practice of photography in a particular region? Are we looking at the technical issues and the impact they had on the forms and

practices of photography? Are we thinking about the audiences for particular images or kinds of images and how they circulated? Are we asking who produced them and for what reasons, or what the circumstances of production were? Are we looking at the images themselves, at their formal qualities, or examining them as historical documents? Addressing all of these questions in a single study may not always be possible; however, these are all relevant aspects of the history of photography.

Finally, what is the universe of photographs that is being examined and where did the photographs come from? Do they form part of a private collection that was intentionally assembled or are they from a public archive or collection? What percentage of the collection has been included in the project? Are there other significant facts about the photographs as a collection that are important to communicate?

For this essay, I am considering a history of Ottoman photography that is concerned with the official representation of the empire. I have focused primarily on the period of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), in part because this period is extremely rich for the topic. I am interested in understanding the widest extent of the category of official photography (the definition of which is still evolving) in terms of the corpus of images, the manner in which they were produced and circulated, their intended audiences, and the messages that they carried. The photographic material on which this project depends is contained in the Gigord Collection, an extensive collection of albums, loose photographs, and related material that was assembled in the 1970s and 1980s, and which was acquired by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 1996. This project has so far entailed a careful examination of the Gigord collection, placed in the larger context of the photographic record for the period of Abdülhamid II. The further development of the project would, of course, require a similarly detailed assessment of the archival record; at the

present stage my incorporation of archival material is limited to what is available in published scholarship.

What does it mean to talk about an official photographic record of the Ottoman Empire? In the widest sense of the word official, I am including in my study albums and images that are not personal and that are not directed to the standard tourist audience. To turn that negative definition around, the official photographic record includes compilations of photographs that document the activities of the government or of entities supported by the government, the sultan, and other official bodies. This is a potentially huge category; finding ways to divide it into logical and more manageable smaller categories is challenging. One grouping that has emerged so far is comprised of the albums and images produced at the direction of the sultan or his advisors illustrating the sultan's activities, or other aspects of the empire. Intended to accomplish certain communication agendas, these were thus official projects in the narrow and specific sense of the word.

Some of the best known examples of Ottoman photography fall into this narrower category: the Abdülhamid albums in the Library of Congress and the British Museum, as well as the so-called Yildiz albums. The Library of Congress and British Museum collections were presented to their respective governments in 1893 and 1894 by Abdülhamid, and each contain about 1,800 photographs in fifty-one albums. The Library of Congress albums are relatively accessible through a 1988 special issue of the *Journal of Turkish Studies*<sup>1</sup> and the fact that they are online (<a href="http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003652945">http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003652945</a>), but the British Museum albums are so far only available through a microfiche edition. The two sets of albums are close but not identical in their contents and include a carefully edited presentation of the Ottoman Empire, intended to convey a very specific message to the politicians and other influential members of the two

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Gavin 1988

governments to which the albums were given. Illustrating sites from around the empire, such as schools and their students and hospitals (including representations of modern medical procedures and patients in their neatly arranged beds in wards), as well as military training and exercises, modern buildings, the grand palaces and possessions of the sultan, and monuments of the classical, Byzantine, and Ottoman pasts, the albums claim a place for the Ottoman sultan as the leader of a progressive, imperial power embracing modernity.

In sharp contrast to the meticulously presented view of the Ottoman Empire contained in the Library of Congress and British Museum albums, the Yildiz albums contain over 36,000 photographs in 911 albums and are an encyclopedic if slightly random view of sites and people from every corner of the empire. The Yildiz albums are much more difficult to access, although a 2007 publication by Nurhan Atasoy does present an overview of their contents (and scholars can study copy photographs at two sites in Istanbul). The collection's 911 albums are of varying size and format, and are filled with photographs commissioned by the sultan or his agents, sent to the palace by photographers knowing of the sultan's interest in photography, or presented as gifts to the palace by foreign dignitaries and rulers. The subject matter of the photographs in the Yildiz albums is as varied as their origin, including everything from Japanese scenery to "mug" shots of Ottoman criminals and newly constructed railway and police stations from all over the empire.

The two album projects just discussed, the Abdulhamid albums and the Yildiz albums, were massive in scale and incorporated many thousands of photographs covering a diverse, but strategic range of subjects. However, the official photographic record of Abdülhamid's reign also includes more targeted projects, smaller albums and individual photographs that show the activities of the ruler, high-ranking officials, or official activities of various kinds. The Gigord collection has numerous albums which fall into this category of official photography, including a group of three albums produced by the chief photographer of the ministry of the navy, Ali Sami

Bey, who served as an official photographer for Abdülhamid from about 1892 until the sultan's deposition in 1909 (fig. 1).

The first of these albums commemorates the visit of Shah Muzaffereddin of Persia to the Ottoman court in 1900 and holds eleven photographs. It begins with the formal group portrait illustrated in figure one, showing the shah together with a group of Persian and Ottoman officials. The photographs are then arranged to present a brief narrative of the shah's short sailing trip along the Bosporus, beginning with his embarkation at Bakirköy, continuing along the coast, and ending with several views of Yalta, where his trip ended. Each page includes a hand-written label in Ottoman Turkish identifying the subject, along with a penciled transliteration into modern Turkish in all but one case, and in that last case, penciled notes in German describing the subject of the photograph.

A second album by Ali Sami Bey illustrates the dedication ceremony of the Kaiser Wilhelm fountain in Sultanahmet on January 27, 1901 (fig. 2). The twelve photographs in the album allow the viewer to see various components of the ceremony, which was presided over by the Ottoman foreign minister Tevfik Paşa and Field Marshall von Bieberstein. Arranged as a visual narrative, the album includes views of the newly completed fountain, assembled dignitaries, speeches and other aspects of the ceremony and even presents an intriguing view of the dining table set for a formal banquet with a replica of the fountain as a centerpiece. The last few photographs show the ship and crew of the German guests.

These two albums and a third related example share significant similarities in format in terms of album size, cover design, and number of photographs (fig. 3). Each album has a red or brown cloth cover decorated with an imperial insignia (an Ottoman coat of arms that was adopted

in the early 1880s)<sup>2</sup> or other imperial signage on both front and back covers, and contains a focused presentation of images showing a certain event, usually in ten or twelve photographs. The photographs are gelatin silver, and are quite faded. The rather messy transliterations into modern Turkish and the notations in German that were added after the albums were produced indicate the continued circulation of the albums beyond what was originally intended for them.

The albums' similarities in format suggest that they were a regular production, not unique objects, an idea which is confirmed by Bahattin Oztuncay in his magisterial work, The Photographers of Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> According to the newspaper Sabah, Ali Sami Bey was present at both of the events recorded in the albums and produced commemorative albums almost immediately for presentation to the sultan and the shah, among others. The Persian ruler then commissioned Ali Sami Bey to produce twelve more copies of the album he was given, and it seems likely that it is one of these that ended up in the Gigord collection. As a result of these projects, Ali Sami, in his Ministry of Navy office, was put in charge of supervising the production of other commemorative albums, using photographs that had been taken by photographers working on specific assignments across the empire. While we do not necessarily have the same level of detailed knowledge concerning the later production of similar albums, such as two volumes in the Gigord collection from 1911 illustrating a trip by Sultan Mehmed V to the western region of the empire, the existence of these albums as well as numerous others and related loose photographs in the Gigord collection and elsewhere indicate that the practice of the photographic documentation of the official activities of the sultan certainly continued well beyond the reign of Abdülhamid II.

Apart from documenting the activities of the ruler, an enormous variety of other topics concerning the activities of the government are addressed in official photography, such as the training of Ottoman firefighters, the manufacture and sale of cigarettes and other tobacco

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Eldem 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Oztuncay 2003.

products, and the building of railroads, to name only a few. There are numerous albums illustrating these subjects, and many more, in the Gigord collection. These are often sophisticated productions demonstrating a wide familiarity on the part of Ottoman photographers with a range of photographic techniques, but space constraints prevent a full discussion of these albums.

In addition to the albums that were produced at the behest of the court to depict aspects of the government, the photographic record includes material from a broader official context, one example of which we will examine here (fig. 4). It is an intriguing object, a large album in poor condition that presents the work of the Comité central du croissant rouge in 1877-78 during theRussian-Turkish War (which was the first use of the Red Crescent symbol). The album was clearly an expensive object, carefully and beautifully designed. The cover ornamentation is much more elaborate than many albums from this period, and on the inside some pages are also decorated, as in a portrait assemblage of the members of the central committee (fig. 5). The page is designed intentionally to display the small portraits of the seventeen committee members, with each person's name printed below his portrait. The next page, honoring doctors and one nurse who died in the course of their service, is similarly designed specifically to accommodate these images and ornamented with wreaths and garlands framing each portrait.

From here the album goes through a tightly ordered presentation, in twenty pages, of the society's work, showing their meeting room in Dolmabahçe palace, several of their hospitals, both in Istanbul and further afield in Thessalonika, and the ambulance corps (fig. 6), including a team in Erzerum. Two pages present eight examples of the work (individual patients with their healed surgery wounds) of one of their doctors, Dr. Sevastopulo, a member of the central committee and identified as the student of Professor Broca (who is most likely the distinguished

French professor of clinical surgery in Paris),<sup>4</sup> as well as a photograph purporting to show an operation in progress (fig. 7).

Given the care that obviously went into composing it, the image of the operation is worth examining in some detail. The photograph presents a large group of approximately fifty people carefully organized, in a manner reminiscent of the *tableau vivant* that were popular in many photographic contexts in this period. The composition has a shallow picture plane, with people arranged across the wall of the hospital building, which serves as a backdrop. Ordinarily, of course, a surgical procedure would have taken place in an operating theatre, but taking such a photograph indoors was largely beyond the limits of available photographic technology at this date. Also, photographing an actual operation in progress would not have permitted the more comprehensive presentation of the activities and people involved that this composition highlights. Hospital staff are grouped in a number of small vignettes, demonstrating a series of actions which may or may not have happened simultaneously during the course of an operation, but which all would have taken place at some point in the procedure. Moving across the picture from left to right, we see attendants assisting medical personnel with washing before the procedure, a nurse holding equipment, a man recording the details of the procedure, other attendants looking on, a cluster of men around the patient, more onlookers, and a table on which the tools to be employed during the procedure are displayed under the watchful eyes of several more attendants. Given the crowded space of the photograph it is impossible to see exactly what each person is doing, but we can understand that the purpose of this photograph was to document a complicated medical procedure that required the presence of an extensive group of participants. The image is also a testament to the fact that Ottoman photographers were able to mobilize large groups of people

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Clark 2008.

into complex compositions, and their subjects knew what was required of them in terms of the production of the photograph.

Finally the album ends as it began, with a view of the central committee, this time facing the camera arranged around a table, a more workmanlike presentation than the decorative arrangement seen in figure two. Although aspects of the specific circumstances surrounding the production of this album will never be known, we can deduce quite a lot based on the information within it. First of all, it is very clearly dated—the dedicatory inscription on the first page, written in French, includes the 1878 date, which also appears on the cover of the album. Second, also according to the dedicatory inscription, the album was given to the Comte of (the rest of the name is illegible) by Doctor Pechedimaldji (one of those whose portraits appeared in the album, and who was very active in the formation of the Red Crescent Society) on behalf of the Red Crescent Society on September 14, 1878. Given the effort involved in the album's production, especially the design and manufacture of the portrait pages, and the inclusion of photographs taken in locations far removed from Istanbul, it seems likely that other presentation albums were made at the same time. These could have been part of an international fund-raising effort, or intended to publicize the work of the society, which was no doubt considered an impressive example of international collaboration, given the make-up of its central committee and the effort involved in obtaining international and Ottoman government recognition of the society.

What conclusions can we draw from this disparate array of albums, a handful of the thousands of albums and photographs that survive from the late Ottoman Empire? Taken as representatives of this much larger group, these albums as well as other albums and loose photographs in the Gigord collection indicate the extent to which the production and circulation of photographs had permeated the Ottoman bureaucracy, especially in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and confirm the existence of a complex communications strategy, with the

organizational structure and technical capability to support it. Archival records similarly document communication between the palace and officials throughout the empire regarding the photography of specific sites and events that were to be sent to the palace, as well as the roles, pay, and decorations awarded to the government officials who were responsible for producing the vast photographic record desired by Abdülhamid.<sup>5</sup> There is no question that Abdülhamid succeeded in putting into place the technology and bureaucratic structures to amass an extensive body of official photographs. The degree to which his government's communication strategy was consistently articulated and its success in the short and long term are matters that these photographs are less able to explain. To understand those issues we would need to look much more closely than I have so far done at the circulation and reception of the official photography of Abdülhamid's reign, and that is a project for another day.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Atasoy 2007.

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## $\underline{Illustrations}$

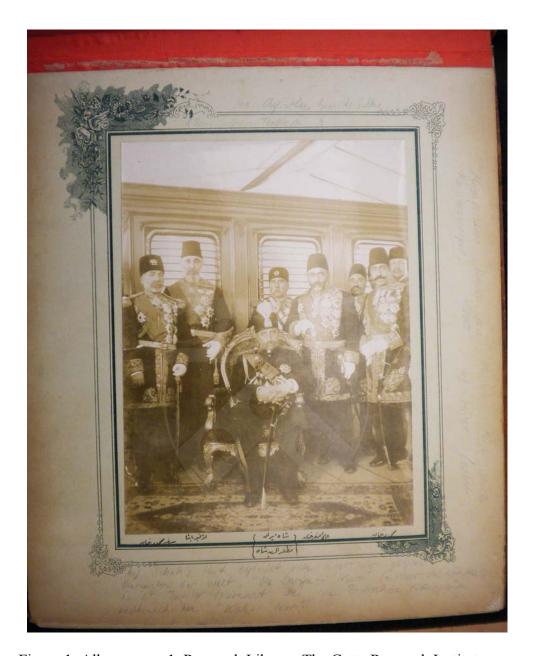


Figure 1: Album, page 1, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 38)



Figure 2: Album, page 1, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 37)

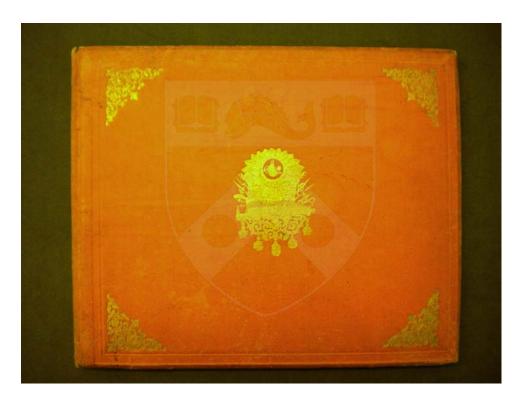


Figure 3: Album, cover, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 38)



Figure 4: Album, cover, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 20)



Figure 5: Album, cover, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 20)



Figure 6: Album, page 14, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 20)



Figure 7: Album, page 14, Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California (96.R.14, Box 20)