Negotiating Between the Real and the Imagined: Portraiture in the Late Ottoman Empire

Nancy Micklewright

There is a sharp disjuncture between portraiture as it existed in a traditional Ottoman context and how it came to exist in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ottoman world, a disjuncture which is especially striking in terms of women’s representations. To cite only one example from many possible comparisons, in a miniature painting from the Surname by Osman of c.1582 in the collection of the Topkapı Sarayı, the women of the court parade the parade of guilds from the grilled windows above the sultan in the upper left of the left half of the image: their shadowy outlines are just visible. In decided contrast to those shadowy women, a photograph of Adile Hanım Sultan, taken on the occasion of her wedding by the Istanbul firm of Sebah and Joaillier in 1917, also in the Topkapı Sarayı collection, provides us with a clear depiction of the face, elaborate jewelry and beautiful dress of the subject. In this essay, I would like to explore this shift in representation and what it can tell us about Ottoman identity and the self. Given the careful delineation of gender in Ottoman art and society, and my own desire to present a gendered reading of this topic, men and women’s portraits must be considered separately, and my primary focus will be on the portraits of women.
In order to make sense of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century material, and particularly to appreciate the contrast with earlier practices, it is important to understand the earlier traditions. We will therefore consider briefly a few examples of Ottoman portraiture as well as some painted depictions of women, before turning our attention to nineteenth-century developments.\(^2\) The importance of portraiture within the Ottoman art tradition is widely acknowledged. So far, however there has been almost no discussion of the fact that surviving examples of Ottoman portraiture all show male subjects.\(^3\) That is, until the second half of the nineteenth century, there are virtually no representations of women which could be described as portraits.

It is essential in this context to define exactly what is meant by a portrait. In discussing portraiture, most writers make a distinction between images in which the subject is the focus of the painting, a portrait, and those which include an identifiable representation of a named individual in the context of a specific historic event.\(^4\) Although it would be possible to devote a great deal of attention to constructing a definition of portraiture, for our purposes, this will suffice: an image in which the representation of the sitter, a specific individual, is the main preoccupation of the artist. It is important to make a distinction between portraiture and historical narrative, and to note that Ottoman portraiture, until the mid-nineteenth century, is concerned almost exclusively with representations of the male elite.

One of the earliest surviving examples of Ottoman portraiture is the portrait of Mehemmed II attributed to the artist Sinan, dated 1475 in the Topkapı Sarayi collection. The three-quarter view of the subject and seated, cross-legged pose in the painting become the standard format for the presentation of a portrait. A suppression of background detail in some cases, or complete lack of background in others, allows both artist and viewer to concentrate attention on the subject. While aspects of painting

---

\(^2\) Space constraints will necessarily limit this overview, as does the preliminary nature of the study of some aspects of Ottoman painting. For example, the imperial portraiture of the Ottoman court is currently the subject of a long term study by a group of international scholars, the results of which have not yet been published.


---

style and costume changed over the centuries, this format remained remarkably constant, as eighteenth century examples demonstrate.\(^5\)

Ottoman imperial portraiture is frequently carried out in the context of genealogical texts, which were either produced as separate manuscripts, or embedded in longer texts and intended for presentation to various people, including the ruler, court viziers, and even foreign ambassadors.\(^6\) The idea of the portrait as well as certain aspects of the Ottoman style of portraiture are often described in terms of their relationship to Renaissance art. Because of the extensive contact between the Ottomans and some Europeans, particularly the Venetians, as well as the working visit of the Venetian artist Gentile Bellini to Mehmet’s court, Ottoman artists were certainly aware of Italian portraiture. While it is fascinating to note the persistent complexity of the relationship between Ottoman artists and other art traditions, from both West and East, this particular example seems to me to indicate once again the ability of the Ottoman artist to adapt what is initially a foreign form to Ottoman requirements. Of the entire range of portraiture as it was practiced during the Renaissance and later,\(^7\) the Ottoman court developed only imperial portraiture in a miniature context. These royal images, while perhaps accurate in terms of physiognomy, were primarily intended as images of royalty and empire. Given as political gifts both inside and outside of the empire, they communicated in the same way as the commemorative medals and etchings of European royalty which circulated at the same time, as well as associating the Ottoman line securely with other major Muslim figures.

Given the distinction made earlier between portraits and images which include but do not focus on named individuals, I would argue that there are no true portraits of Ottoman women until the middle of the nineteenth century. Before then, in traditional miniature painting, women appear in a limited number of contexts, and almost never as named individuals. A rare example of a painting which includes a specific, historic woman appears in the 1558 *Süleymanname* when Süleyman receives Queen Isabella and the infant Stephen. From the same period, we
have a 1597 image which shows the funeral of the valide sultan, attended by a crowd of mourners including some women, dressed for the street, and relegated to the margins of the crowd, and also the page, appearing in the lower corners of the painting. Later examples show more diverse roles for women, particularly in the illustrated manuscripts of the Zencanname and the Humne of Ayaş. I have written elsewhere about how women are depicted in Ottoman painting, how those depictions change over time, and how those depictions contribute to the construction of normative social roles and expectations for women, but that is not our primary concern here.

Space constraints prevent me from presenting a nuanced view of Ottoman portraiture (for men) and other painted representations (for women) over a period of centuries. Within the miniature painting tradition, there were certainly significant changes over time, in setting, style, and subject matter, to name only the most obvious. The Ottoman tradition of portraiture continued into the nineteenth century in a limited way with the production of a number of portrait manuscripts, but it is difficult not to be more impressed by what appears to be a sharp disjuncture between much of what goes on in nineteenth-century Ottoman art and what had proceeded it.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, nearly everything about Ottoman painting seems to have changed. Court patronage of illustrated manuscripts was greatly reduced. Most of what has survived from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are illustrated manuscripts of religious texts. While this body of manuscripts has a great deal to tell us about the relationship between painting and religious practice in the Ottoman world, miniature painting in nineteenth-century Istanbul no longer enjoyed its former prominence. By the second half of the century, painters trained in military schools, Paris ateliers, and beginning in 1883, the Fine Arts Academy in Istanbul, and they worked in oil paints or pastels at easels. Their subject matter resembled that of their European counterparts: landscape, still-life, and portraiture, among others. Artists painted themselves, their families, and their friends, as well

---

3 In eighteenth century copies of these manuscripts, we see women in a range of settings: the bath, a park along the Bosporus, a brothel, at home, to name a few. For a discussion of these images, and further references to them, see Micklewright, “Musicians and Dancing Girls.”
9 Micklewright, op. cit.
10 These manuscripts are the subject of a recently completed Ph.D. dissertation by Alexandra Bain, "Islam’s Sacred Symbols: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Ottoman Prayer Books" (University of Victoria, 1999).
as, of course, commissions for others. While the subjects of some
nineteenth-century portraits might be the same kind of men whose
portraits would have been included in portrait manuscripts done earlier,
these paintings were now intended for display. Portraits of the sultan, for
example, were hung in various state offices. Furthermore, a special medal
of honor, the tavşir-i hümâyûn, or imperial representation, was
established by Mahmud II (1808–1839), and consisted of a miniature
portrait, often on ivory, encased in a jeweled frame. At the imperial level,
portraiture still had a specific and limited role, but with the change in
format and its availability to a wider group of patrons, there were
important changes in the appearance, function and patrons of portraiture.
Osman Hamdi Bey’s 1905 portrait entitled İhtiyar Batıksız Ismail Aga is
an example of a new portrait genre, involving a subject who is
definitely not a member of the court elite, and who most likely did not
commission the work.

This break with past traditions is particularly obvious with regard
to women’s painted portraits. Even in terms of published examples, the
number of women’s portraits is striking, and there are certainly many
others in public and private collections which have not been published.
The subjects of such portraits often look straight out of the picture plane,
confronting the viewer directly and confidently, as in Halîl Paşa’s 1900
pastel, Lady with Gloves. The women depicted in these portraits were
generally members of the elite, highly placed women who, earlier, would
not have been visible to men outside of their own families. What does it
mean that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when women
were still very much restricted in their “public” presence, there was an
interest on the part of some elite women, in having their portrait made?\footnote{i}

As was the case with nineteenth-century painted portraits, we find
that women frequently commissioned photographic portraits of
themselves, or at least consented to have their portraits made. Numerous
portraits of royal women have survived in the Topkapı Sarayi archives.
However, we can also find depictions of Ottomans of other social classes,
as for example in the photographs from the Abdil Hamid albums of the
1890s which show school girls, dressed in their best, looking directly out

\footnote{i} I have argued elsewhere that the public/private construction used to describe women’s
roles in the Ottoman empire, based on western understandings of these terms,
does not adequately describe the complex social worlds in which Ottoman women
moved. See Nancy Micklewright, “Public and Private for Ottoman Women of the
Nineteenth Century,” in Women, Patronage and Self-Representation in Islamic
at the camera.\footnote{For more information on the Abdül Hamid albums, see Carney E.S. Gavvin, editor, “Imperial Self-Portraits: The Ottoman Empire as Revealed in the Sultan Abdül Hamid II’s Photographic Albums,” special issue of Journal of Turkish Studies 12 (1988).

Both Sarah Graham-Brown and Engin Çırgen include examples of such family portraits in their books. See Sarah Graham-Brown, Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1869–1930 (New York, 1988); Engin Çırgen, Photography in the Ottoman Empire, 1839–1919 (Istanbul, 1987).

\footnote{For a fuller discussion of how Ottomans interacted with the new art of photography, see Nancy Micklewright, “Personal, Public and Political (Re)Constructions: Photographs...}}

Collections of late nineteenth-century studio portraits from Istanbul often include family groups, some clearly of modest means, who desired to have their portraits made.\footnote{For more information on the Abdül Hamid albums, see Carney E.S. Gavvin, editor, “Imperial Self-Portraits: The Ottoman Empire as Revealed in the Sultan Abdül Hamid II’s Photographic Albums,” special issue of Journal of Turkish Studies 12 (1988).

Both Sarah Graham-Brown and Engin Çırgen include examples of such family portraits in their books. See Sarah Graham-Brown, Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1869–1930 (New York, 1988); Engin Çırgen, Photography in the Ottoman Empire, 1839–1919 (Istanbul, 1987).

\footnote{For a fuller discussion of how Ottomans interacted with the new art of photography, see Nancy Micklewright, “Personal, Public and Political (Re)Constructions: Photographs...}}

Photo historians have long asserted that the advent of photography permanently changed the nature of portraiture, both in terms of who had access to portraits and how they functioned. What was once a one-of-a-kind mark of status became infinitely reproducible, available to nearly everyone. Photography developed in Europe in part, at least, in response to pressures to provide likenesses to more people, at reduced cost. While that specific situation was not present in the Ottoman empire, photography nonetheless reached the capital shortly after its invention, and the impact of the new technology on portraiture was very similar to what has been traced in Europe and North America. All sorts of people, not only the male court elite, visited the commercial photographers’ studios to have their portraits made. The photographic products that were wildly popular elsewhere, for example the card-sized carte-de-visites that were collected into photo albums, as well as the photograph albums themselves are found in the Ottoman context.

The album, as a vehicle for the viewing of portraits and other images, was a familiar construct in the Ottoman context. Ottoman portraits, directed to a small, private audience, had traditionally been displayed in, first, manuscripts, and later, albums. While the painted portraits of the second half of the nineteenth century were produced for a different viewing mode and audience, the photographic portraits which were much more numerous were also intended for album display. Thus the enthusiastic adoption of photographic portraiture among a wide audience of Ottoman residents should be understood as an important example of a consumption pattern in which a foreign object, the photographic portrait, assumed a culturally specific meaning in the Ottoman context of portraiture, involving the substitution of a photographic portrait for the traditional painted miniature portrait in an album intended for circulation among a specific audience.\footnote{For more information on the Abdül Hamid albums, see Carney E.S. Gavvin, editor, “Imperial Self-Portraits: The Ottoman Empire as Revealed in the Sultan Abdül Hamid II’s Photographic Albums,” special issue of Journal of Turkish Studies 12 (1988).

Both Sarah Graham-Brown and Engin Çırgen include examples of such family portraits in their books. See Sarah Graham-Brown, Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1869–1930 (New York, 1988); Engin Çırgen, Photography in the Ottoman Empire, 1839–1919 (Istanbul, 1987).

\footnote{For a fuller discussion of how Ottomans interacted with the new art of photography, see Nancy Micklewright, “Personal, Public and Political (Re)Constructions: Photographs...}}
Commercial photographers—whether European, Greek, Armenian or Muslim—working in Istanbul produced innumerable Souvenir de Constantinople albums for sale to foreign visitors.\textsuperscript{16} Filled with photographs produced for the tourist market and thus extremely useful for understanding the way in which the city and its inhabitants were constructed by commercial photographers for their foreign audience, these albums have little to tell us about how portraiture was practised by the Ottomans.

The value of carefully assembled groups of photographs as a means for communication was clearly understood by some Ottomans. This is indicated by the existence of various albums, produced for specific occasions or audiences and intended to communicate specific information. A particularly noteworthy example of such a project are the Abdül Hamid albums referred to previously. Assembled at the behest of the sultan for presentation to the British and American governments in 1893 or 1894, the albums represent an attempt to convey a very particular view of the Ottoman empire to those audiences. The two sets of albums are nearly identical, each consisting of 51 volumes containing about 3,820 photographs. The photographs focus primarily on the most modern aspects of the empire: educational institutions, the military, and industry. Other popular subjects include the natural beauties of the landscape, and the imposing architectural monuments of the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. Among the photographs in these albums are hundreds depicting people, including numerous views of students, often in pairs, looking directly out at the viewer. The students in these photographs are depicted as types, not necessarily as individuals, and thus these are not portraits in the sense that we have been using the term. These photographs do, though, provide a certain kind of “portrait” of some residents of the empire.

The most ambitious photographic project carried out in the Ottoman context must be the albums assembled for Abdül Hamid, now in the Istanbul University Library.\textsuperscript{17} Filled with images from all over the empire taken at his behest, the photograph albums assembled for him

\textsuperscript{16} See Gilbert Beauge and Engin Çiraz, Images d’Empire. Aux origines de la photographie en Turquie/TürkİYE’de Fotograf ve Öncüleri (Istanbul, n.d.), pp. 194–199, for a brief discussion of these commercial albums, and illustrations of two covers.

\textsuperscript{17} The Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) has a complete set of copy prints and negatives of the original albums. I am grateful to the Director General of IRCICA, Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, and Department Head, Dr. Hidayet Nahoğlu, for their generosity in allowing me to look through the entire collection.
contain approximately 34,879 photographs.\footnote{This is a close estimate of the contents of the Yildiz notebooks which contain copy prints of the original albums. There are many duplicate photographs in the albums, as well as breaks in the numerical sequences of the albums; thus this is not a count of the total number of different images.} The albums contain the same range of views as the two sets which were presented to the British and American governments, in addition to subjects which would not have been considered suitable for export, such as the new police stations which were built all over the empire and prisoners accused of various crimes. The albums, which are supposed to have served as a means for the sultan to keep abreast of events in his farflung empire and abroad, also include views of official ceremonies, new Ottoman factories, catalogues of goods, portraits of Ottoman officials, and monuments and works of art from Europe and Japan. The albums would seem to embody the use of photography as a means of official surveillance which was emerging in other political contexts at the same time as it was being developed in the Ottoman empire.\footnote{John Tagg’s work on nineteenth-century photography and surveillance was groundbreaking; see his The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Annherst, 1988). Other work has followed Tagg’s.}

A much more limited range of subject matter is presented in a yet another Ottoman album project. A massive volume of photographs, entitled Les costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1875, was produced on the occasion of the Vienna Exposition of 1873.\footnote{Although this volume was actually published as a book, in its design and conception it resembles very closely a photograph album, and has thus been included in this discussion.} The photographs are very similar in format, showing two, three or four people set against the same plain background, each identified as a resident of a particular town or region. In some cases, information about the sex, religious or ethnic identity or occupation of the subject is also included. Each photograph is accompanied by a paragraph or two of text. Intended to display the diversity of the Ottoman populace, these photographs are, like many in the Abdil Hamid albums, portraits of types, not individuals. However, in its awareness of the communicative value of the medium of photography and clearly delineated objectives, this project is a further indication of the ease with which Ottomans put the new medium to their own uses.

European style painting was adopted in Istanbul in the same decades that photography became available, and again, a more diverse group of people than would previously have been involved in portraiture, sat for painted portraits. In the Ottoman example, however, as opposed to what went on in Europe and North America, I would argue that
photography was not introduced to respond to an already articulated desire for portraits, but rather led the way in expanding access to portraiture, and thus influenced the wider acceptance of the painted portrait.

Ottoman portraiture before the mid-nineteenth century is the portraiture of the male court elite. While these portraits demonstrate some level of concern for an accurate representation of the physical features of the sitter, and depict him in appropriately elaborate, but not necessarily accurate court dress, the portraits function primarily as political messages. With rare exceptions, the individual appears in his role as ruler or official, projecting an image of wealth and power.

While this imperial aspect is still present in Ottoman portraiture from the mid-nineteenth century onward, other works testify to the existence of more personal images. These portraits involve the collaboration of the artist or photographer and the subject in the creation of a certain identity for the sitter, providing an opportunity for self-presentation not available earlier in Ottoman society. Photographic portraits in particular, and perhaps to a lesser extent painted portraits, are part of the construction of a normative social reality which involves class, gender, ethnic and professional identities and claims to identities. While we all recognize that the possibilities for the manipulation of the photographic image are virtually unlimited, photographs continue to be valued, on an explicit or implicit level, for their truthfulness. Understanding the implications of the constructed nature of portraiture in the Ottoman context is challenging.

In some cases, it is easy enough to detect the fabricated realities which photographs can create, as for example when European visitors to Istanbul don traditional Ottoman dress and pretend to be smoking water pipes. Other images present more complex challenges. Wedding photographs, for example, often use the same formal characteristics of setting and posture as those produced in Europe, yet the relationship pictured in the photograph and the social circumstances of the subjects would have been dramatically different from their European counterparts. It is easy to be misled on the basis of the formal similarities of the photographs to assume corresponding similarities in social relationships. Looking at late Ottoman photographs for information about social identity and self-presentation is a tricky endeavor, but one which is potentially very useful.

Figure 6: Family life, by Ali Sami, 1908. (Private Collection.)

Several decades after the establishment of the commercial studios in Istanbul, photographic technology began to be more widespread and accessible to amateur enthusiasts. With the spread of technology and the availability of photographic supplies, Ottoman photographers could take pictures of their family and home life, and thus have a greater role in determining the manner in which they presented themselves photographically. These photographs, which remain for the most part in family collections, are difficult to get hold of, although a few have been published. In one case, for example, the family of the Ottoman photographer, Ali Sami, is depicted, informally grouped in one of the rooms of their house, wearing everyday clothes, with four different newspapers spread about the room.27 This family portrait, obviously a collaboration between photographer and family, offers a very particular view of the group as they chose to represent themselves. Similarly distinctive photographs present a variety of carefully composed images, taken to record different moments in the lives of families or individuals, and reveal a considerable degree of sophistication in the extent to which some Ottomans were able to interact with the medium of photography.

Is the readiness with which Ottomans adopted photography and portraiture indicative of a change in Ottoman identity in this period? Certainly we know that the definition of Ottoman identity was the focus of a highly charged, contested discourse in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It is difficult not to see the Ottoman enthusiasm for photography (which for most Ottoman consumers equaled portraiture) as one means for exploring new self-images, new identities. This is particularly true, I think, for women. Their appearance in photographic and painted portraits coincides with a new, more public voice in print, with more public roles for women poets and musicians, with increased educational opportunities for women, and beginnings of the gradual entry of middle class women into the workplace. Not yet actually visible in many contexts, Ottoman women are virtually present, to borrow a contemporary idiom, through their portraits. Thus women’s portraits, and men’s too, of course, were another means by which new identities, perhaps temporary ones in some cases, could be explored, for both the sitters and the viewers. Whether these identities were real or imagined, both at once, or neither, is a topic for another time.

Bibliography


And, Metin. Turkish Miniature Painting: The Ottoman Period (Istanbul: Dost Publications, 1982).


Atasoy, Nurhan and Filiţi Çağman, Turkish Miniature Painting. (Istanbul: R.C.D. Cultural Institute, 1974).


Beaune, Gilbert and Engin Çigen, Images d’Empire. Aux origines de la photographie en Turquie/Türkiye de Fotoğrafı Onculeri. (İstanbul, n.d.).


Doumani, Beshara, Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900 (Berkeley, 1995).


Eyuboglu, B.R., et al., Çağdaş Türk Resimden Örnekler (Ak Yayıncılar, 1982).

Frierson, Elizabeth, “‘Is There Any Future for us in Trying to be Ladylike?’ The Ethnic Politics of Late-Ottoman Dress and Manufacture” (Unpublished paper, 1995, used with permission of the author).


Goldthwaite, Richard, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1500–1600 (Baltimore, 1993).


Hamdi Bey, Osman and Marie de Launay, Les costumes populaires de la Turquie en 1873 (Constantinople, 1873).


İnalçık, Halil and Donald Quataert, An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).


Mukerji, Chandra, From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism (New York, 1983).


Quataert, Donald, editor, Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1500–1922 (SUNY Press, 2000).


Turani, Adnan, Batt Anlayışına Dönük Türk Resim Sanatı (Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1977).


Wigh, Leif, Photographic Views of the Bosphorus and Constantinople (Stockholm, 1984).