

*Twisting Realism: The Representation of Power in the Portraits of Ottoman Sultans  
in the Early Photographic Era*

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**Abstract**

The chronicles of history suggest that the period between the second half of the 18th throughout the end of the 19th century is a prolific era for scrapping off the Ottoman-Turkish state from its ages-old, tradition-led shield. In this period, starting from the reign of Selim III (1789), the raising diplomatic relations with European countries necessitated reshaping the state institutions according to westernized models and gradually a new emphasis on the visual representation of authority emerged. Furthermore rooted than Mehmed II's earlier attempts in 15<sup>th</sup> century to add a touch of realism in Ottoman iconography, Selim's successor, Mahmud II displayed his portraits in a realistic manner in the public space for the first time, as means of visualizing the imperial authority in a "westernized way". Unlike the conventional Ottoman iconography which consisted of depersonalized, static representations of the sultans, these aspired to crystallize the Imperial power in the personality of the sovereign. Moreover the immediate and unquestioned immersion of the newly invented photography (1839) by the Ottoman court increased the dilemma of the visual representation of the sultans and imperial authority. This paper will analyze the effects of the introduction of photography in the Ottoman Empire, by mainly focusing on the effects of the photographic medium in affirming and/or negating the imperial authority.

Keywords: Ottoman iconography, photography, Ottoman visual culture

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## Mehmed II and the First Turn of Realism

Realism in the Ottoman court has a volatile past. Nonetheless Mehmed II, the Conqueror's invitation of the Renaissance era master, Gentile Bellini, to Istanbul in 1479, has an exceptional place in the Ottoman history. Although the visual narration means were never extinct from Ottoman court, realism never so far had occupied a central place in the visual representation of the sultans until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Gülru Necipoglu tells us that up until the 8<sup>th</sup> century, during the medieval era, there was an increasing disapproval for the mimetic, figural representation, due to the orthodox Islamic view (2000:22). Therefore portraits, if any, lacked individualistic traits and shared a common identical view. Moreover, as is marked by Necipoglu, as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, acts of iconoclasm were common as in the instance given by Evliya Celebi, of a Jannisary's destruction of figural paintings in a Shahname, an illustrated manuscript, he had bought at an auction (Ibid: 23).

Indeed, Necipoglu traces the slow acceptance and stereotyping of figural representational conventions, first in the Timurid court around early 15<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, a holding a rose suggested festivity and peace (\*1), a compass underscored the depicted, as patron of arts and science (\*2), an armor signifies a brave warrior (\*3), a turban, a successful scholar etc. Necipoglu gives Emel Esin's account on how such conventions declared status not only by such attributes but also by seating poses; frontal crossed-leg position was reserved for ruling members, one knee bent, for minor princes and kneeling sideways on both knees was used to represent vassals (Ibid: 25). Thus in these conventions, power was, in a way, represented in stereotypical visual codes, which were to a great extent adopted by the Ottomans as is evidently seen in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century portrait of Sultan Mehmed II, smelling a rose (\*4).



Figure 1: (1451-1469). Sultan Abu Said Mirza Timur Khan



Figure 2: (1451-1510). Muhammed Şeybani Ouzbek Kahn



Figure 3: (ca. 1450). Warrior from the Album of Emir of Buhara



Figure 4: Nakkas Sinan Bey. (ca.1480). Portrait of Mehmed II the Conqueror, smelling a rose

Necipoglu asserts that Mehmed II not only consulted his imagery to make his promotion in neighboring monarchies, but he also implemented a hybrid style, combining those of Timurid miniature and Italian realism to appeal to a wider audience, both occidental and oriental neighboring courts (Ibid: 29). As can be read with the codes, Necipoglu highlights that Mehmed's cross-legged posture announces his assumption of the title of Khan or Emperor from the more modest titles of Amir or Bey he used earlier in his reign (Ibid: 28). Added to this, is his more realistically rendered facial features, which were a pioneering novelty for that time. This hybrid style was the outcome of Mehmed's fascination with realism which is also highlighted in an account by Vasari as being triggered by some Italian portraits sent to him as ambassadorial gifts (in Necipoglu, 2000: 29). Mehmed moreover, is known to have his court painter, Sinan Bey, trained by an Italian master (Ibid: 30).

However after Mehmed's reign, the growing Islamizing trend in the Ottoman visual culture left aside the hybrid style with its realistic approach. Nonetheless Mehmed's adaptation of Timurid conventions of figural representation has been fundamental in shaping an endogenous Ottoman iconography. Consequently, a new genre has emerged in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman court for illustrated historical manuscripts, which were typical in their narration of historical texts (Ibid: 31). Notable in this era is a historical manuscript called *Şema'ilname* (1579), detailing the life of the first twelve sultans from Osman I to Murad III, narrated by the court historian Lokman and illustrated by Nakkaş Osman. Although it follows the iconographic prototype established by the portrait of Mehmed II, smelling a rose, *Şema'ilname* suggests a remarkable change in the approach to realism since it flattens the image of sultans and

renders it tantamount to a static, codified icon (Ibid:31) where realism is avoided by all means (\*5). Necipoglu here gives the account of an earlier portrait of Selim II executed by Nigari which Nakkaş Osman evidently referred to in his posthumous conception of the sultan in Şema'ilname (Ibid: 32) (\*6 -7). Nakkaş Osman not only omits the liquor glass in Nigari's conception but he seriously alters Nigari's visual language and forces the sultan's image to become a legitimate Ottoman one. With respect to Nigari's work, Nakkaş Osman's conception of Selim's facial features are further compressed, idealized and codified. In representing the other sultans, Nakkaş Osman even establishes categories by constructing parallelisms between identities of homonymous sultans and represents them in a likewise manner.



Figure 5: Nakkaş Osman. (1579). Mehmed II, the Conqueror in Şema'ilname



Figure 6: Nigari. (1561-62). Selim holding a wine cup



Figure 7: Nakkaş Osman. (1579). Selim II in Şema'ilname

Necipoglu maintains that this is an “inward cultural turn involving the conscious rejection of foreign visual elements” marking a fundamental change in cultural frontiers and adds that Nakkaş Osman’s homogeneous style delineates a cultural

boundary with European visual culture thus underlining its exotic foreignness (2000:32).

Although the tradition of illustrated historical manuscript writing gradually faded, the crystallization of Ottoman iconography around Nakkaş Osman's style of the 16<sup>th</sup> century shaped much of the Ottoman visual culture (Necipoglu, 2000:61) until Mahmud II's realistic turn in 1800's. Even though it defied realism, this endogenous iconography allowed a homogeneous vision where one's gaze is frowned upon the sultan's only window to his individuality, his face, but rather directed on the codes encrypted in the composition; his posture, the position of his legs, hands, his turban and his aigrette (if any), the objects in the hands etc. Necipoglu claims that "the autonomy of the individual is weakened precisely because of his membership in a dynasty whose pedigree is represented in this portrait series" (2000:36). Indeed, as Necipoglu also remarks what makes these portraits representative is not their visuality but rather the textuality that accompanies them (2000:34); a textuality that constructs them as parts of a ruling dynasty, an imperial history.

In fact, that the individuality of the ruling sultan was never delineated in pictorial terms acted as a shield against the ungraspability of his "self". This shield protected the image of power by making it less vulnerable to the many ambiguities of the self. Thus turning the depicted sultan into a ruling "other", this shield functioned to allow the individual "self" to co-exist with its imperial roles and keep its image in line with conventions.

### **The 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the Second Turn on Realism**

By the end of the 18th century things were beginning to change. On one side, there are the increasing nationalist uprisings of the Empire's ethnically heterogeneous population, prompted by the French Revolution, and on the other, an attempt to modernize the state institutions in order to line up its appearance with its European neighbors, shape the period.

Such neighbors, with whom the Empire has had hostile relations in history, were now emerging as military and diplomatic allies more prominently than ever as in the battle for Egypt by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This surprisingly prompted efforts with modernizing the ages-old image of the Empire, initially under the rule of Selim III (1789 - 1807). The attack on Egypt, in 1798 by Napoleon-led France, was a first hit on the face to the, later to be called "ill men of Europe". However in 1801 with a military alliance with British forces, the Ottomans took over control in Egypt. In exchange, Selim III wanted to show his gratitude for his British allies in a gesture that extended conventional rituals. Edhem Eldem tells us that Selim III's offering of a jeweled aigrette, a çelenk, as a military merit to the British admiral, Horatio Nelson was extraordinary since for the first time it was given to a foreigner (2004). This was due to an incommensurability of Ottoman Imperial orders and their Western counterparts. Up until the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century the only Imperial presents for foreigners consisted of robes of honor or golden boxes, which were insignificant for Western style military orders. Hence under the rule of Selim a new emphasis was born to keep up, in format if not yet in style, with the European representation means of Imperial magnitude and power. Accordingly a new set of Imperial medals were struck called the "Medal for the Event of Egypt", Vak'a-i Mısriye Madalyasi (\*8). This latter and

the new banner of the reformed military units, Nizam-ı Jedid, (Reid, 1984: 232) were the evident efforts of Selim III to establish a new, consistent iconography as the use of the crescent and the star motif in both cases suggests



Figure 8: (1801). Medal for the Event of Egypt (Vak'a-i Mısıriye)

The emphasis on the representation of Imperial power grew stronger. A further shift in the style of Ottoman iconography occurred during Selim's successor Mahmud II's reign (1808 – 1839), renowned by his efforts to abolish the ages-old Jannissary military troops to replace them by a Western model of unitary army. The eradication of the Jannissary institution eventually ended in a witch-hunt and extended beyond the military field to a projection of modernity. Mahmud II's desire to renovate the Empire found its' echo in the field of visuality with a more focalized image of the Ottoman state through a normative and unitary lens. In that, Mahmud's iconography prominently included and consisted of his own image as icon. Not only that, for the first time in the history of Ottoman state, the western realist style Imperial portraits of Mahmud II, *Tasvir-i Hümayun*, (\*9) were circulated in official buildings as military barracks and schools as a testimony to his radical reforms on secularity. This was different from Mehmed's circulation of his imagery which did not extend beyond the neighboring courts. Günsel Renda also maintains that the use of Imperial portraits by Mahmud II was to a great extent to "institutionalize his reforms and persuade the general public to espouse them" (2000: 505).



Figure 9: Marras. (1832). portrait of Sultan II. Mahmud (Tasvir-i Hümayun)

Unlike the repetitive, monotone language of traditional miniaturesque portraiture where individuality is repressed by a strong sense of belonging to an Imperial history, in Mahmud's realist portraits individual traits are realistically rendered in the foreground to align his people with respect to his own image, his own ideals. Thus Mahmud II's portraits, appearing for the first time in public space, signal to an implementation of a new visual regime; one where the individuality of the sultan comes forward and peeks under the shield of canvas and pictorial conventions.

### **Twisting Realism**

Thus, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged a new emphasis on the crystallization of power through the personalized image of the sultan. Sinan Deringil also underlines this notable break in the Ottoman iconography during the 19th century as it becomes increasingly preoccupied with its self-image (1993: 6). After Mahmud's reign this becomes a tendency followed by his successors, such as the 1914 stamp series leaving the Islamic abstract style decorations eclipsed by the portrait of sultan Mehmed V Reşad (\*10).



Figure 10: (1914). Series of postage stamps portraying Sultan Mehmed V Reşad

Overall a new iconography was on the verge to come which was soon to be accompanied by new imaging technologies, that of the greatest turnout in visual history, photography. As Orlin Sabinov also points; while the exchange of new ideas were never blocked between the Ottoman society and its European neighbors, the Ottomans adopted foreign cultural patterns only if they were really needed (Sabinov, 2010:397). Sabinov makes this point for the printing press, which only came to use in the Empire for a short period around mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to the general belief, as Sabinov points, printing press was allowed, apart for the printing of Koran due to a fear that the new, unproven technology could change the sacred wording of the book. Thus the demand for scientific and other kind of publications was so low that it did not suffice to make a printing press survive. Therefore it was not until the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century that the mechanical reproduction allowed by printing press was deemed superior to manuscripts and the demand for books increased, leading the full acceptance of printing press in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the case of photography, photography's evident capacity to capture the referent was beyond question. Due to the fact of the imminent appearance of the visual referent, photography took a different place in the visual realm, compared to any other forms of visual representation. It was not long before 1840's that Istanbul got covered with photography studios. And sooner the new realist trend in the Ottoman iconography, easily found its echo in this new invention, making it a new apparatus for the legitimate image of the Ottoman sultans. However, this new imaging technology will also bring with itself, a paradox: in the name of glorifying the image and securing the individuality of the sultans it can also put into question their power.

The official announcement of the invention of photography in Europe coincides with the ascending to the throne of Sultan Abdülmecid in 1839. Being the father of the last four sultans of the Ottoman Empire, he was one of the sultans who were not so much interested in his photographic representation. Therefore, there isn't any known photographic image of him that survived until today.

Abdülmecid was known as being an introvert and melancholic figure, and unlike his brother Abdülaziz, who was nearly obsessed with photography by allowing a photography studio in the court and hiring official court photographers, he seemed to have a more refrained attitude towards this new invention. Although he has a few portrait paintings done by European painters such as Jean Portet (\*11), David Wilkie (\*12) and Luigi Rubio (\*13), none of them represented him as an authoritative figure. In a period where Europe was fascinated with photography, his dis-interest in it might also indicate that he had a critical distance to photography and its effects on the "image" of the imperial power.



Figure 11: Jean Portet. (1850). Sultan Abdülmecid



Figure 12: David Wilkie. (1840). young Abdülmecid



Figure 13: Luigi Rubio. (1847). Sultan Abdülmecid

However, this refrain didn't survive after Abdülmecid's death as his brother embraced the new technology very quickly. Although photography entered the Ottoman land as an extension of "Orientalism" it soon became popular first among the non-Muslim communities living in Istanbul and then became one of the favorite tools of the sultans and especially Abdülaziz, in re-creating a self-image which is presentable to Europe.

One of the first photographers that were hired by Sultan Abdülaziz, was an Armenian Ottoman, Vinchen Abdullah, owning a photographic studio called "Abdullah Brothers" which he founded with his brothers (Hovsep, Gomidas Kosmi, Kevork) in

1858. When the studio of Abdullah Brothers was officially hired by the Ottoman court in 1863, two brothers, Vinchen and Kevork took photographs of Abdülaziz and his family as well as executed carte-de-visites of Ottoman statesman, and military commandments. Abdülaziz, who was having a personal interest in photography, supported and protected them until his death in 1876.

There are many photographs of Abdülaziz taken by Abdullah brothers during his reign but they vary from each other in many ways. If we look at the early photos taken around 1850s and 60s, we see the desire to create an imperial image within the limits of the photographic conventions. In a 1863 photograph (\*14) for example, we see Abdülaziz dressed in his military uniform seated in a courtly interior and leaning on a table with books on it. This is quite typical of the early photographic conventions where one has to sit (in order to prevent any blurriness). In addition, the costumes and décors would reflect the sitter's character (in this case his wealth and his military and intellectual power). This way of representing oneself with symbolic objects might be quite similar to the miniatures of the early eras. However if one looks closer, one can also notice that the lack of color, the rigidity of the pose and the fakeness of the setting create a different atmosphere, which can be considered quite the opposite of what the early miniatures were inhibiting.



Figure 14: Abdullah Brothers. (1836). Sultan Abdülaziz

Moreover the photographs of the later periods are becoming less and less detailed with a focus on the sultan's physiognomy and physical traits but still lacking any

information about his character. In another photograph (\*15), we see Abdülaziz from the profile, dressed in a much more simple dress and without any decor or surroundings. This photograph was taken to be a prototype for the medal commemorating his trip to London 1867. But the important shift here is the usage of photography as a tool, which in a way objectifies the Sultan rather than glorifying him. This objectification is even more visible in the latest photographs of Abdülaziz taken in 1874 (\*16) where he is depicted as an old individual whose image is no different from any other person's representation of the period.



Figure 15: Abdullah Brothers. (1869). Sultan Abdülaziz



Figure 16: Abdullah Brothers. (1869). Sultan Abdülaziz

This reduction from a glorifying self-image with full of symbolic elements to a close up representation lacking any color and detail, is typical of photography's inevitably scientific and deadly approach. As John Tagg mentions, photography works for the production of the subject in and through representation (Tagg, 1993:4).

Similarly, Allan Sekula, in his article "The Body and the Archive", refers to the coincidence between the emergence of photographic practice and those disciplines that categorize archive and control the individual body. For him, photography subverted the privileges inherent in portraiture that had been used in painting for honorific purposes (Sekula, 1989:346).

After Abdülaziz, Abdülhamid II took the reign. At that time, Abdullah brothers' works were popular not only within the Empire but also in Europe, especially when some of their photographs were exhibited in the 1867 Paris Exhibition. In 1878 an Ottoman Greek photographer, Vassilaki Kargopoulo has been assigned as "the photographer of the Sultan", by Abdülhamid II and worked for him until his death in 1886. He also produced lots of works, mostly portraitures from the court. He took several portraits of the princes and princesses, including the daughters of Abdülaziz, however Abdülhamid II was less interested in his photographic portraiture than his father. According to Catherine Pinguet, although he ordered Kargopoulo to produce

the portraits of the members of the court and kept records of them in the form of Albums, he refused his portrait to be taken (Pinguet, 2012: 146). Among the very few photographs taken of him are the British photographer William Downey's photographs of him as a prince during a visit to England with his father, (\*17) and some portraits taken by Abdullah brothers when he was a young prince (\*18). But as these portraits were not taken during his reign, so some European publishers such as Le petit Journal in France had to re-use these images and even manipulate them in order to make them look as if they are produced during his reign (\*19).



Figure 17: Wiliam Downey. (1867). Sultan Abdülhamid II

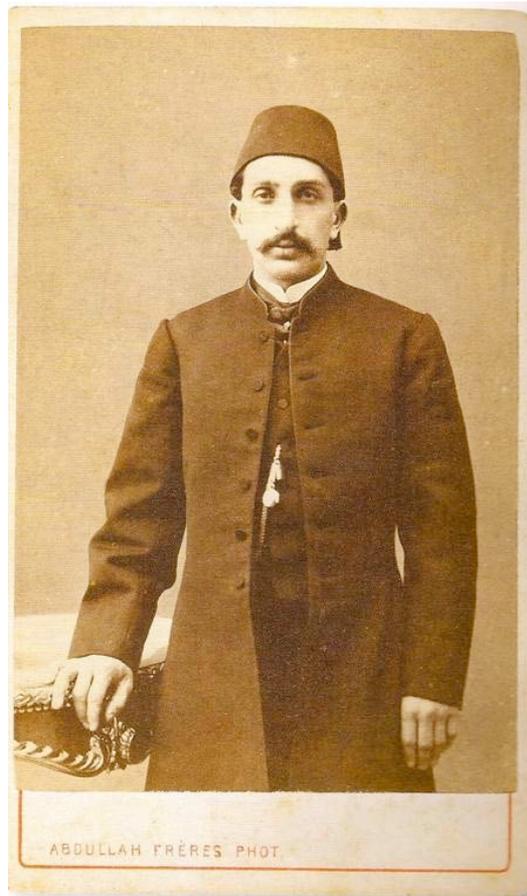


Figure 18: Abdullah Brothers. (1869). Sultan Abdülhamid II as prince



Figure 19: (1869). Sultan Abdülhamid II as prince on the cover of French periodical «Le Petit Journal»

## Conclusion

It seems that the reception of photography by the Ottoman Empire has a dual character. On the one hand, it has been welcomed and appreciated as a tool of spreading the image of the Ottoman Empire to the world, but on the other, some Sultans seem to be aware, maybe intuitively, of the danger it can contain; that is, its potential of stripping off the individuality the photographed subject not only by reducing it into an object but also bringing it to the same level with the other subjects, thus endangering also their Imperial power (\*15, 18).

Moreover, during the early years of photography in the Ottoman Empire, another photographic tradition was also highly popular. Started with James Robertson, the British painter and photographer much earlier, this tradition was aiming to capture local people with their professions or ethnical characteristics, depicting them with their objects and/or costumes (\*20, 21, 22). These costumes and profession series photographs taken both in the cityscape and in the photography studios were perfectly reflecting the general desire and attitude of early photographic practice itself, which is a desire to provide a catalogue of cultural and professional identities. Since then, photography has been conceived and used as a powerful tool in the construction of identity narratives.



Figure 20: Abdullah Frères. (around 1860). Pastry seller



Figure 21: Abdullah Frères. (around 1860). Knife grinder



Figure 22: Pascal Sebah, French photographer. (1873). taken during the universal exposition in Vienna, from *Les Costumes Populaires De La Turquie*.

As Kaja Silverman also argues in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, when a camera is trained upon us, “We feel ourselves subjectively constituted, as if the resulting photograph could somehow determine ‘who’ we are” (Silverman, 1996:135). She adds that photography has the power both to preserve and to destroy the referent, and the camera, like the gaze, has the power to provide the subject with a specular body, while at the same time abolishing its existential body. Thus, photography’s power to produce and reproduce dominant ideologies whether of gender, of race, of class or status, through its creation of seemingly consistent but monotonous identities, found its echo in the Ottoman Empire, in different ways, which also includes the photography of the court and the sultans, turning them into exotic objects of desire and curiosity. As we see in the anonymous photograph of the princes (\*23) the little boys who are put on a pedestal and exhibiting their military costumes, ready to be catalogued and labeled, just like the costumed figures of the pervious photographs which are deliberately produced for the book “*Costumes Populaires De La Turquie*” taken by French photographer Pascal Sebah and exhibited at the universal exposition in Vienna, 1873.



Figure 23: Bogos Tarkulyan. ( around 1900's). Princes Abdürrahim Hayri (1894-1952), Mehmed Cemaleddin (1890-1946) and Mehmed Abdülhalim (1894-1926); posing as their guards on the sides are Mehmed Rıza Paşa's son Ziya Bey on the left and Admiral Ahmed Eyüp Paşa's son Ali on the right

When it comes to conventional miniatures, although they are also creating monotonous identity narratives by scarifying this time the individual physical traits, they worked nonetheless to preserve and underline their Imperial power by adding additional attributes, which empower the figures in a different ways. We can thus

argue that, both the miniature portraits and the photographic portraits, create and attach identity narratives on the Sultans, but they work in opposite directions and aims.

The sense of continuation and belonging to a ruling dynasty, so stressed as to the point of effacing the individual in the classical Ottoman iconography, leaves its place to as what Roland Barthes would call the death certificate of a moment (2000). Ironically here, in the photograph of the princes, the same certificate also attests to the dissolution of the dynasty, which was to be abolished in a few decades. The princes, the heirs to the Ottoman throne hence its future, deprived from pictorial conventions of power and rendered vulnerable to the gaze; the photograph far from documenting the continuation of a ruling dynasty frames its discontinuation.

Although, at the beginnings of its emergence photography is perceived as bringing an end to the desire of realism by achieving the goal of realistic representation; its true nature was immediately discovered when it has started to be used as a tool, which distorts reality by faking it and by claiming to be transparent and objective. Under this claim it is also paradoxical that the very first photographs were unable to capture movement and color. In that sense they were perhaps even further away from reality than any other visual representations that preceded them.

Perhaps some Sultans of the Ottoman Empire like, Abdülmecid and Abdülhamid felt this paradoxical aspect of photography, whose invention coincides with the beginning of the decline of the Empire. We can thus argue that the symbolism that governed the miniature iconography taking the representations away from realism, was no less realistic than the early photographs of the Ottoman imperial authority. Thus the photographic tool far from bringing realism in visual representation, it rather twisted it.

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