

‘Camera Ottomana: Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire, 1840-1914’

LYDIA HARRINGTON



The Camera Ottomana exhibit entrance at Koç University RCAC.

Camera Ottomana: Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire, 1840-1914
Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations, Istanbul, Turkey
April 21 – August 19, 2015

Camera Ottomana, curated by Zeynep Çelik, Edhem Eldem, and Bahattin Öztuncay, on display during the summer of 2015 at Koç University’s Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (RCAC) on Istanbul’s bustling pedestrian Istiklal Street, ambitiously took on the complex role of photography in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. The exhibition used one interface to explain another: a variety of tools—digital, cartographic, and written—were employed to help the visitor understand how an empire’s elites represented their dominion through photography. Freestanding light boxes and digital close-ups were just a few of the ways in which the exhibition exposed visitors to photographs in various forms, including studio portraits, post cards, newspapers, film footage, and albums. Through maps, timelines, and explanations of different image technologies in Turkish and English, the visitor could take-in ample artistic information without being overwhelmed. Supplementary explanatory and political text, which seemed lacking in the exhibition, is provided by the accompanying book of four essays on Ottoman photographic history, three of which were written by the curators.

Camera Ottomana challenged the conventional history of photography in the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) as Orientalist and controlled by foreign markets, instead showing the diversity of photographers and subjects along with the Ottomans’ nuanced views toward this new technology. The profession of photographer in its earlier stages was indeed dominated by religio-ethnic minorities and itinerant foreigners—and ex-patriots and Western tourists controlled the market. However, this exhibition contributes to the burgeoning historiography of Ottoman photography by demonstrating that the development of this art in Istanbul was not primarily driven by, nor was it a reaction to, a Western Orientalist perception of Ottomans as “other.” The exhibition illustrated how the

experiences of individuals in the Ottoman Empire were both universal and unique by integrating wide-ranging examples including: the commemoration of family events such as weddings, circumcisions, and First Communion through portrait photographs; albums commissioned by Sultan Abdulhamid II depicting the opening of train stations across the empire; as well as Istanbul Police Station photos of criminals kept on file lest the perpetrator commit a repeat offense.

Camera Ottomana was innovative in its incorporation of a wide variety of photographic media. With the inclusion of newspapers and popular magazines, the curators highlighted the importance of photographic documentation of commemorative events. They considered reactions by readers published in periodicals or that had been found in private correspondence and which reveal much about both social changes and continuities. The presence of physical copies of the well-known album *Les Costumes Populaires de la Turquie* from the 1873 Vienna International Exhibition as well as one example of the hundreds of photo albums commissioned by Sultan Abdulhamid II, were reminders that imperial albums were objects of political propaganda used to demonstrate not only how Ottoman elites viewed themselves, but also what image of the empire they wanted to project abroad. Photographs of cityscapes and infrastructure projects document shifts in tastes in architectural style as well as the rapid modernization and centralization of the empire. By addressing this range of media and attitudes, the exhibition highlighted the agency exercised by local photographers, patrons, subjects and commentators, and demonstrated that the early history of photography was a global, rather than a Western, phenomenon.

Exhibition website: <http://cameraottomana.ku.edu.tr>

Exhibition catalog: Zeynep Çelik, Edhem Eldem, Eds. [*Camera Ottomana: Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire: 1840-1914*](#). Istanbul: Koç University Press, 2015.

Recommended listening: Eldem, Edhem. [“Following Ottoman Photographs.”](#) Digital podcast. *Ottoman History Podcast*. Episode 195.