

Souvenirs and stereotypes: an introduction to Ottoman costume albums

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By the close of the 16th century, Constantinople, once the preserve of Venetian and Genoese merchants, was again opening up to the world. A series of trade treaties signed between the Ottoman sultan and the rulers of western Europe resulted in new opportunities for merchants, and with them came a new level of European fascination with Ottoman culture: from brilliant Turkish carpets to the deep blues, reds and aubergine purples of Iznik ceramics to the muddy concoction of coffee – the taste for *turquerie* had struck. Interest in Ottoman lands is also attested through the proliferation of travel accounts, by writers such as Ogier de Busbecq, Nicholas de Nicolay and, later, Mary Wortley Montague. Their vivid descriptions of Turkish life and customs are well-known and widely referenced by scholars.

In addition to these relatively familiar records of European-Ottoman contact and exchange is a much less well-known genre of book – the Ottoman costume album – which emerged in the mid 16th century. Artistically, these albums are simple; they contain series of coloured drawings that depict the hierarchy and diversity of Ottoman society. Images range from the sultan and his court to drawings of Turkish ladies (see the image on the cover of this volume), Greek monks and Islamic holy men, biscuit sellers and water-carriers, prostitutes and drunkards. Alongside these drawings of single figures are narrative scenes that commonly show imperial wedding processions, the muezzin's call for prayer and even gruesome public executions. The breadth of imagery found is astounding, and herein lies the significance of these albums, for they neatly abbreviated the religious, ethnic and social diversity of Ottoman Constantinople for a European audience.

Thus far my research has identified 160 albums dating from the 16th century to the 19th; of these, 43 manuscripts were previously unknown or miscatalogued. These albums were highly popular records of Oriental travel, but their artistic simplicity (or crudeness, according to some scholars) has led to their general neglect. The few previous studies have focused upon individual manuscripts, thereby failing to realise many of the rhetorical and pictorial conventions that governed this genre. My research engages with these materials collectively, and it will result in the first comprehensive study of Ottoman costume albums. In particular, I have been able to chart how the iconography of these albums remained essentially unchanged from the 16th to the 19th century. For instance, dancing Greek girls are always depicted sashaying in the same yellow and pink outfits over a period of three centuries. Thus, what initially appears to be an accurate image of social documentation becomes a stylised stereotype.

While the figures themselves remain unchanging, many of the accompanying labels indicate how different European audiences and nations perceived the Ottoman world in various ways. For example, the image below (dated ca 1580–1590) depicts a young man in a skullcap who is clearly labelled 'A coffee drinker'. In isolation this would appear a fair, albeit simple identification. However, when one compares this character with similar images in albums in Athens, Doha and Jerusalem, among others, it becomes clear that this man is in fact a wandering Muslim dervish, known for cutting his own skin out of religious devotion (note the red lines that scar his arms and chest). The (anonymous) original owner of this album therefore misread the drawing owing to the prominent cup that the dervish holds in his right hand. There is no evidence that this golden vessel contains coffee, but the association between this drink and the Ottomans was so strong that it must have appeared a natural conclusion to the labeller of this image. Another English-owned album from the same period includes a strikingly similar image dated ca 1590 (see next page, top-left). The golden cup and the deep wounds of religious fervour are conspicuously absent; this is probably the result of the artist miscopying the image.



'A coffee drinker': Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.14.23, fol. 28 (with the kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge)



‘A devoted person that beggete his virtualls’: Oxford, All Souls, The Codrington Library, MS 314, fol. 27 image no. 34 (with the kind permission of the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford)

Nonetheless, the Oxford and Cambridge drawings unmistakably depict the same character. They share many essential elements: the green and red skullcap, the pierced ear and the sheepskin cloak. The label of the second example (fol. 46v) reads: ‘A devoted person that beggete his virtualls’. Here, the figure’s religious devotion is correctly, albeit vaguely, understood. In this way, my research engages with European associations and perceptions of Ottoman society. Certain patterns emerge in the language and imagery of these albums: Italian and English examples contain many naval scenes and several depictions of mercantile figures, whereas German and Austrian manuscripts focus upon militaristic subjects and violent forms of punishment.

Rather than simply reading these images as records of life in Constantinople (as is commonly assumed), my research proposes that these drawings came to define the experiences and expectations of subsequent travellers. In other words, European travellers sought out the characters and customs that they saw in these albums. Belly dancing provides a pertinent parallel: it has become so engrained in the

popular imagination that modern tourists expect to see this form of dancing when in Turkey. However, this does not necessarily mean that belly dancing remains an everyday and organic aspect of modern Turkish culture. So too must we be careful in reading the imagery of costume albums as accurate depictions of Constantinople.

The complexities of these seemingly straightforward albums are well illustrated by the figure on the right (dated ca 1620), which also depicts a wandering dervish. This drawing was produced several decades after those of the other two albums, but it shares many of the same details: the figure is shown with a bare torso and cut skin, and he holds a golden cup. The crucial difference is style. The drawings in this manuscript are by an Ottoman artist who copied early costume albums by western artists. From the early 17th century onwards these ‘Ottoman style’ books became more popular than western examples among European travellers. Possibly the aesthetic ‘otherness’ of these images heightened their sense of authenticity as souvenirs of Oriental travel.

With the invaluable support of a Research Grant from the British Institute at Ankara I will be able to undertake detailed studies of more than a dozen manuscripts held in Turkish collections. These albums are of great significance because they demonstrate how Ottoman miniaturists began to copy western images of their own society and culture in the early 17th century. These books illuminate the complex, two-way process of cultural exchange between Europe and the Ottoman empire, thereby challenging a number of preconceptions about East-West relations during the formative period of the 16th and 17th centuries.



‘A Haydari, or wandering dervish’: London, British Library, MS 1928-3-23-046; formerly MS Sloane 5258, fol. 91r (© Trustees of the British Museum)