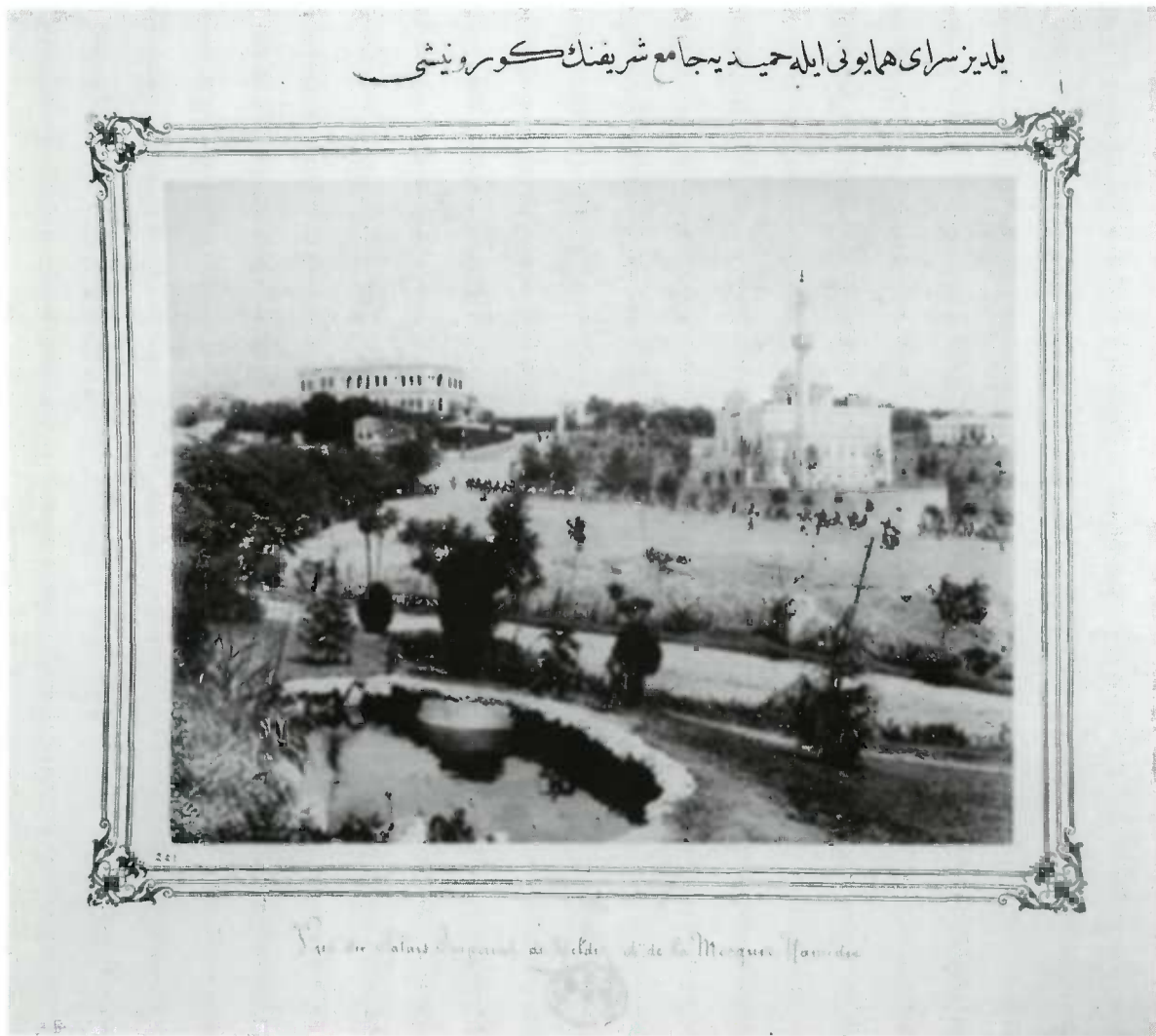


Sultan 'Abdulhamid II photograph collection

Early Turkish photographs in 51 albums from the British Library
on microfiche



Editor: Muhammad Isa Waley

Photograph Albums of Sultan 'Abdulhamid II in the British Library

The collection

The collection of photographs published for the first time in this microfiche edition was presented to the British Museum (London) in 1893 by the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, who reigned from 1876 to 1909. The fifty-one albums, now preserved in the British Library, contain over 1800 photographs; these represent a carefully-made selection from Abdulhamid's enormous collection – comprising upwards of 30,000 photographic prints – which the Sultan kept at his Yıldız Palace and is now in the Istanbul University Library. The U.S. Library of Congress has fifty-one almost identical albums donated by the Sultan.

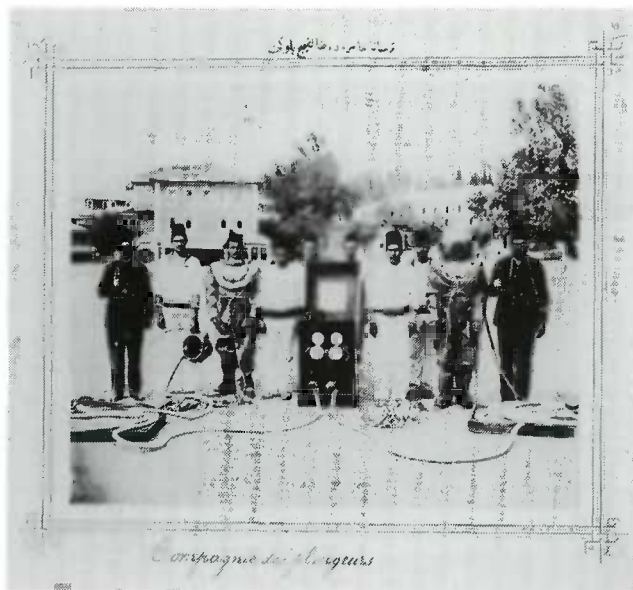
These pictures afford a fascinating view of some aspects of the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s and 1880s. They appear to have been selected partly to illustrate and document the strenuous efforts made by the Sultan and his ministers to reform and modernize the institutions of the Empire and partly to record some of its scenic and architectural glories – mainly those of Istanbul, its environs, and Bursa. As yet, photography was little used for documentary and propaganda purposes, but the Sultan was quick to grasp its potential. It became one of the various means by which he kept himself informed, too. For much of his long reign the Sultan was confined to his preferred residence, the Yıldız Palace in Istanbul, because he lived in fear of assassination. Under the constant threat of foreign invasion and (chiefly European-sponsored) internal revolt, the very

survival of the Ottoman Empire was in the balance. Much of the repression popularly associated with Sultan Abdulhamid's name must be understood in this light.

Early photography in the Middle East

In the early days of photography in the Middle East, its practice was attended by both philosophical and practical difficulties. Photography was regarded with some hostility by many of the people of the region: partly as being an invasion of privacy and partly because some of the Muslim religious authorities deemed it an infringement of the prohibition against pictorial representation. For some Westerners, on the other hand, photography represented an usurpation of a function proper to the painter and sketcher. In the Near and Middle East during the nineteenth century, the art of photography was mainly employed to cater for travellers requiring souvenirs and for "armchair travellers". There was much demand for picturesque views and posed portraits offering to Westerners romanticized images of the mystic East, the Holy Land. Outstanding in quality and quantity were the many thousands of photographic prints of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and other areas, produced by the remarkable Bonfils family between the 1860s and the 1900s. Some Bonfils photographs exemplify what has become known as the orientalist tendency; but, as with the Sultan Abdulhamid photographs, many possess documentary value.





The technical problems, too, were considerable. Even after the invention of the daguerrotype process (in 1839) and the glass negative (1851), long exposure times were required. What is more, the necessity for plates to be prepared and exposures processed on the spot in torrid heat, using such materials as collodion and albumen, often made the former operation hazardous and the latter unpleasant.

The photographers

Of the fifty-one Sultan Abdulhamid albums, at least 35 are the work of a firm called Abdullah Frères, three Armenian brothers who at the time were official photographers to the Sultan. Other studios represented in the collection are those of Sébah & Joaillier, "photographers" to the Court of Prussia"; Febus (Phoebus) Efendi; Ali Rıza, chief photographer to the Ottoman War Ministry; and the Imperial Academy of Engineering. Several albums, however, bear no attributions.

The photographs

The photographs are all in a sepia colour, common for the period in question, that is quite pleasing to the eye; in the microfiche edition, however, they are reproduced in black and white. Having been made on glass negatives, they are also grainless and thus particularly distinct. The prints are glued to thick card mounts bearing captions generally in Ottoman Turkish and in French but also occasionally in English. Each album is bound in a special leather binding with an inscription in Turkish and English to the effect that it was a gift from the Sultan to the British Museum. These bindings are shown on the microfiches at the beginning and end of each album.

Subject categories

For the purposes of this microfiche edition, the albums have been divided into four subject categories. For its users' convenience, our edition includes a conspectus of contents for the albums, and every effort has been made to arrange them in a logical sequence. The subject categories are as follows:

Views, historical monuments, other buildings, and street scenes (17 albums)

Most of these were photographed in or around Istanbul, a relatively small proportion in Bursa and other towns associated with the early days of the Ottoman dynasty.

Military and naval establishments (17 albums)

These albums also include personnel, warships, installations, and equipment, as well as fire brigades and lifeboat crews on parade and practising drills.

Civilian and military educational institutions (15 albums)

Some are located in Istanbul, others in the provinces. There are also photographs of their students, generally posed in pairs in rather wooden-looking studio shots.

Horses (2 albums)

Finally, these albums show us pictures of horses, their grooms, and paddocks at the Ayazağa imperial stud farm.

Here, then, are the Sultan Abdulhamid photographs: as an official image of the Ottoman Empire they are perforce contrived, but to the perceptive viewer they offer fascinating insights.

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| Scope | More than 1,800 photographs |
| Number of fiches | 126 |
| Size of fiches | 105 x 148 mm microfiche |
| Film type | Positive silver halide |
| Reduction ratio | Varies according to the size of the original |
| Internal finding aids | Eye-legible headers with title on each fiche |
| External finding aids | Printed table of contents in the binder |
| Storage | The microfiches are supplied in a sturdy plastic binder with dustcover |
| Order number | LNE-1804/1 |